NOV.

DOUBLE-ACTION WESTERN

20¢

TWO BIG NOVELS

SATAN RIDES THE WASATCH

by Ben Smith

ROSE OF CIMARRON

A TRUE STORY

by Allan K. Echols

ILL WIND

by R. J. Rouse

A DOUBLE-ACTION MAGAZINE

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DOUBLE-ACTION WESTERN

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ALL STORIES BRAND NEW

Two Big Feature Novels

SATAN RIDES THE WASATCH ..... **Ben Smith** **8**
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Ned Haley buys a spread, to find it haunted by the ghosts of a bloody feud.

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Robert W. Lowndes, Editor

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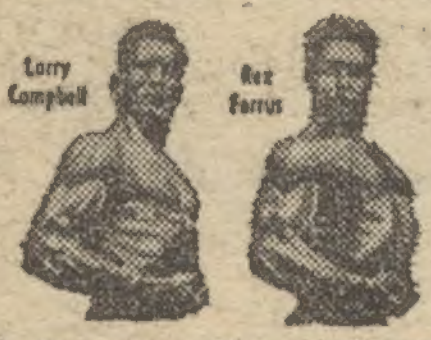

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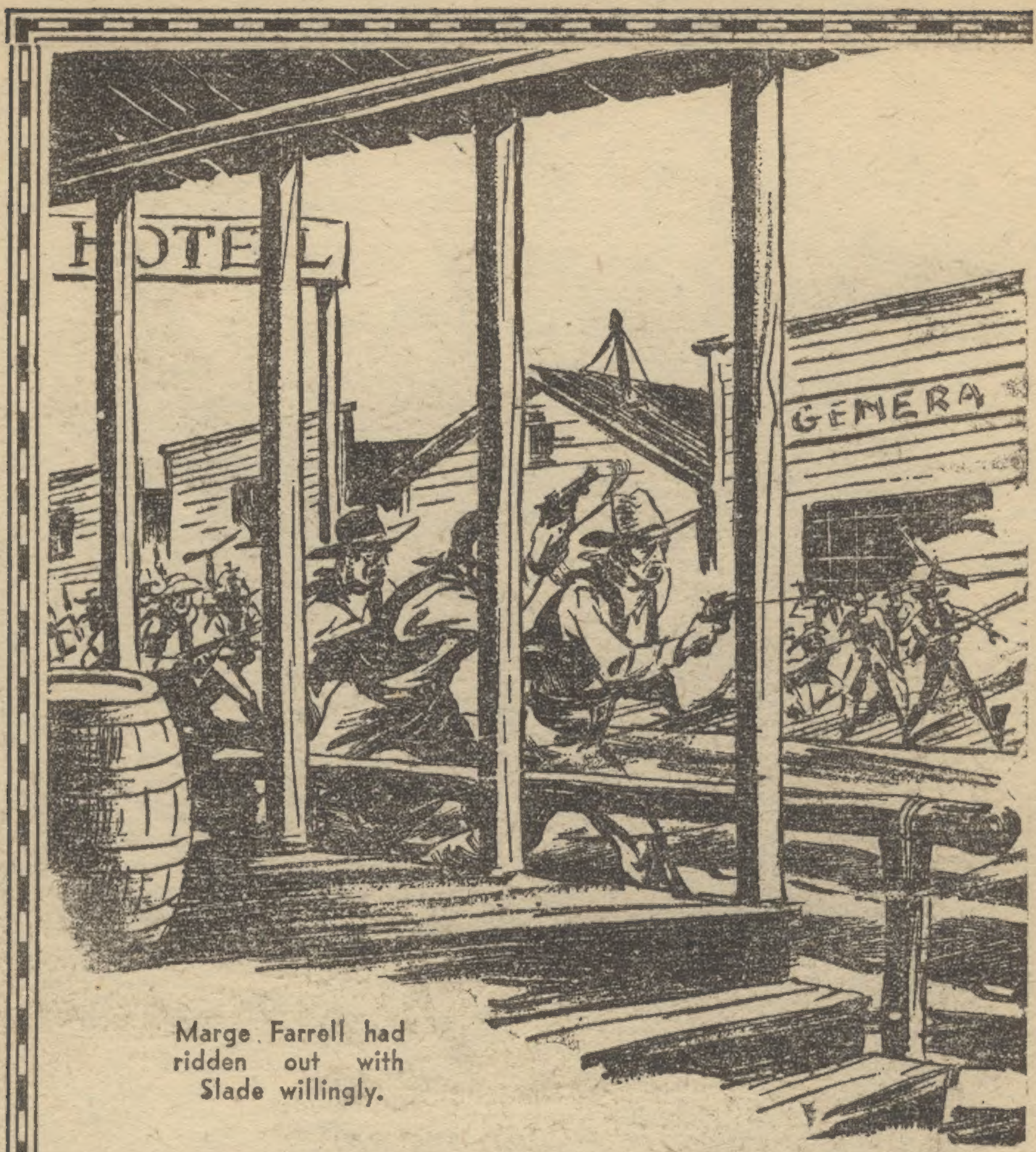


Marge Farrell had ridden out with Slade willingly.

SATAN RIDES

Steve Farrell and his partner, Curly John Myers, had no quarrel with the Mormons, and wanted none. Until they found that Slade, the man who'd run off with Farrell's sister, was here in Deseret and was now a Bishop of the Mormon Tabernacle. Which meant that striking at Slade would probably involve tangling with his parishoners...

FEATURE NOVEL of the VENGEANCE TRAIL

THE WASATCH

IT WAS IN early May, 1858, and the new morning hung like a misty blanket on the broken ranges of the Wasatch Mountains. Higher, further up on the denuded slopes, snows of winter still clung, but here in the pass only the north side of the outcroppings of limestone and marble bore mute testimony of winter's passage. The sunlight, thin and cool, struck through the scant limbs of the trees, causing moisture to drop in

By BEN SMITH

silvery beads from the jutting rocks.

Steve Farrell reined in his black gelding and sat loosely in the saddle, talking to the tired horse, waiting for Curly John Myers. Back in the pass, a hundred yards or so, Curly John swore at the pack mules. Though rather moth-eaten beasts, their appearance belied their performance. Both animals had been with the two men since the Missouri River; now, the Bear, Muddy Creek and Henry's Fork were well to the rear.

Farrell grinned as he half-listened. According to Curly John's own testimony, he had dragged both mules clean from the Missouri by their frayed lead ropes and, by damn! Curly's arms were getting tired.

"If ye won't walk, curse ye," Curly John was spewing angrily as he came into view around a scraggly pine, "I'll shoot the two o' ye and roll your worthless carcasses down the slopes like a pair o' busted wagon wheels."

The mules, being from Missouri, stopped short at the first opportunity and waited for John Myers to show them. Curly swung his broad-brimmed hat down to his shoulders and dragged the sleeve of his heavy shirt across his perspiring brow, muttering indistinguishably.

Steve, moving to the edge of the pass, looked into the valley to the west. "There it lies," he told Curly John. "Yonder is the basin of the Great Salt Lake."

"Aye, lad." Myers' faded blue eyes were troubled as he pulled up beside the younger man; he ran his thin fingers abruptly through the ear-length ringlets whence came his sobriquet. "This land of Deseret is a strange place; I'm not too sure what we'll find here."

Steve Farrell watched him, amusement deep in his black eyes. His mobile mouth, made to appear even broader by his smile, twitched at the corners. Thoughtfully, in mock seriousness, he rubbed his nose. "What *we'll* find here?" he mimicked. "This is my fight."

"Gawd and feathers!" Curly John threw up both hands in despair, inadvertently releasing the pack mules. The two ungainly beasts moved to the edge of the pass and began cropping at the oak saplings. "You'd think I was ridin' along for my health," Curly John snorted. "Instead of playing wet-nurse to a lad just out of rompers."

Steve's laughter, the first for days, reflected from the rock-studded walls in a burst of sound and the two mules, cocking their shaggy ears, moved restlessly toward the slope.

"Let's move on," Steve said suddenly. He was again suffering the sombre change of mood that came to him more frequently through the passing days, "before the mules stray clean to Utah Lake."

HIS GELDING picked its way carefully down the rugged incline that led to the valley floor. Behind Steve, John Myers was loudly and uselessly berating the pack animals as they temporarily eluded his reaching hands.

The trees grew more stunted and undergrowth less verdant, as the two men rode on. They saw patches of soil where grass grew became more infrequent and the ground took on a bleached, unhealthy tone. The outcroppings of marble and limestone, noticed in the higher reaches of the mountains, were gone; in their place, a clinging, pale sand made the going slow and treacherous.

The temperature climbed along with the rising sun, and, by the time the dead waters of the Great Salt Lake were in view, both Steve and Curly John were sodden with perspiration; the horses were well lathered about girths and bridle bands.

"If Sam Slade is here," Curly John muttered angrily, "he is, among other things, a crazy man."

"He's here," Steve replied quietly, moodily watching the gouts of alkali dust spew from under the mule's plodding hooves. "He is somewhere in Salt Lake City; we'll find him."

Curly John swatted ineffectually at a persistent sand-fly that hummed

Marge Farrell

about his ears. The back of his shirt bore a deep wedge of dust and sweat and his bearded face was as if dipped in flour.

"How," he queried, "do we lay our loop? Do we ride into the city, big as Mormons, or do we lay out in the sand heaps and let the bugs chew us to bleedin' ribbons?"

Steve Farrell looked across the heated salt and sand toward the north. Along the shores of the Lake of Salt lay the city of the Mormons; on the east were the craggy peaks of the Wasatch; to the south and west the lesser ranges of the Oquirrh and Tintic. According to the sketchy information which had been given him, also to the south lay Utah Lake and its fresh-water outlet, the river Jordan.

"I reckon," he said at last, "that we'd better head for the south and fresh water. Ask questions here and about; it's better to know the den before you try to catch the bear."

With the latter sentiment, Curly John was in complete agreement. Of sober disposition, a quiet man who planned carefully his next move, he was a proper counterfoil for the energetic, and sometimes careless, Steve Farrell.

Heat-devils danced on the white land under the hooves of their horses and the hot breeze carried the unhealthy odor of a dying land to their nostrils. The great dead sea at their right sprawled like a giant octopus, eating at the salt and sand. No life stirred over its broad expanse; no water fowl dipped and rose above the brine. There was not even anything dead to litter the eroded banks.

"It is," Curly John aptly put it, "the burial ground of the past."

Coming from the time-stiffened lips of a man who had bogged cattle in Montana blizzards and taken active part in the sporadic Mexican border wars, the words were strangely poetic, almost prophetic. In spite of his determination to find Sam Slade and right the wrong the man had done, Steve felt a tiny quiver of uneasiness.

He rubbed the salty perspiration from his big hands upon the rough fabric of his loose trousers and touched the ebon butts of his two guns. They were in a strange land and a place of stranger people; it would be well to go slowly.

JUST AHEAD, seemingly over the dip of the next wind-washed dune, lay a patch of greenery. After the tiring sameness of the alkali, irrigation ditches with accompanying stands of rye and barley in profusion seemed like a mirage. Trees, planted in an orderly row, raised their sheltering branches, making a tiny spot of coolness about the neat, lime-white house.

In the back of the dwelling a tiny garden sprawled in a sort of orderly confusion and into this growing spot, as Steve and Curly John watched, a woman walked, her head and arms bare to the sunshine.

Seeing the riders, she paused and watched them as they slowly approached the house, then she turned and vanished. When Steve and Curly John reached the narrow, white-washed gate, a man stood there, a single-barrel shotgun cradled carelessly over his arm.

He eyed them warily, his time-washed face hard and uncompromis-

ing. His hair, free from the wind and sun, was startlingly white and his closely cropped beard edged the brown of his lined face with a frosting of snow. He wore the loose trousers of a Mormon, stuffed into worn kneeboots, and his shirt was of rough homespun.

"Who art thou?" he called softly, casting a glance toward the house behind him. It was evident that he wished to cause no alarm to some of its occupants.

Steve rode closer before he answered. "We are from east of the Wasatch." How far east he felt it might be inadvisable to add. "We have been..." he disregarded plain-spoken Myers' frankly disapproving glance..."prospecting."

"I'm John Myers," Curly said flatly, "and it's my right go-by; the kid in man's britches is Steve Farrell."

The old Mormon grinned at the display of honesty and the arm cradling the old shotgun relaxed. "Art thou," he queried further, "of the Church of the Latter Day Saints?"

"No," Steve told him, "but we are of good will."

"I ask no more than that of any man," the oldster said. "I am Reagon O'Connor," His wise eyes twinkled with some inner burst of humor. "Ye are not prospectors, as the young man has so rashly claimed, for there is neither pick nor shovel on your mules. But neither are you Mexicans nor of the Army; so ye are welcome."

He dropped the scarred butt of his shotgun to the ground, looking again toward the house. At one of the unglazed windows, a curtain fluttered as it was hastily dropped into position.

"Ye will find water by the barn," Reagon O'Connor continued, "and feed, should ye lack it; I will wait for thee at my house."

He paused and again the glint of faint humor lighted his eyes. Yet, in spite of something that was secretly amusing to him, there was an intangible fear deep within him; it was like a subtle rip-tide, just under the placid surface of his wind-burned face.

"After the animals have been cared for," he finished abruptly, "honor our house by eating there. Thou wilt find the rest of us just as curious as my daughter who watches at the window."

The last words were spoken with rising inflection and the agitation at the window proved that his words were heard and understood. Behind Steve, who was leading his gelding toward the watering trough, came Curly John, too impressed by O'Connor's character even to swear at the balky mules.

THERE WERE four of the O'Connors, Steve found later. Besides Reagon and his plump, pleasant wife, there was the daughter, Bess, and a younger son, Robert.

"This," said Reagon, indicating Bess, "is the one who watched so carefully from the window."

Bess, whom Steve judged was just past eighteen, blushed but kept her head high, her eyes proudly seeking Steve's own. "There is so little here," she said quietly, "for us to watch, even from windows."

Her father laughed. "Bess has been crying again for a trip to Salt Lake City," he explained and his eyes were soft as he looked at the girl's dark hair. Again the strange shadow of fear crossed his lined face. He reached his rough hand and caught her slim fingers. It was as if he were trying to draw her closer to him, almost as a man might attempt to dam a river of quicksilver with his bare hands. "She is a little young yet," he muttered enigmatically.

"Robert." Reagon's manner changed abruptly. "Get from behind thy sister's skirts and come forward."

The boy, about eleven, reddened with his shyness, throwing into contrast the defiant banner of freckles across his snub nose.

"He'll make a hand," Curly John laughed, eyes crinkling with his wide smile; "he's learned to keep a still tongue."

It was not until after they had eaten and the purple shadows of sunset had begun to creep across the sage, that Steve spoke of Sam Slade. The three of them, Reagon O'Connor, Curly John Myers and Steve, were perched on the edge of the narrow verandah watching the first blue line of night seep across the desert.

"I'm wondering," Steve suddenly broke the thoughtful silence, "if you know of a man called Sam Slade?"

Curly John said nothing, watching the Irishman from the corners of his eyes as he knocked out his pipe against a boot heel. Reagon O'Connor looked across the flat lands of Deseret, his eyes on the horizon. A gopher, his beady glance inquisitive, scurried into the yard and stood up, his forepaws trembling with his own audacity. One of O'Connor's cows came across the open field and through the barnyard gate, a bell on her neck clanking tunelessly. On the faint breeze that still bore the memory of the day's heat, the perfume of the sand and sage lay, like a counterpane.

"These are troubled times," the Mormon said, "Gentile is against Mormon, and the Mexicans, scarcely friendly since the treaty of Guadaloupe, are against us both. Utah is under martial law; it is not a good time to remember hatreds."

He was abruptly silent and it was evident that he had finished.

"I'll never forget Slade," Steve replied quietly and his toneless restraint made his words even more violent. "As long as he's alive, I'll look for him."

Reagon O'Connor shook his white head and his voice was kindly, but firm. "Thou wilt carry your battle to all of us," he said solemnly. "Sam Slade is our Bishop."

Steve, numbed by amazement, heard a muttered exclamation from Curly John. Evidently the oldster was as thunder-stricken with the news as Steve himself; it seemed impossible that a man of Slade's character could be an important personage in the Mormon Church. When Steve had known the man, his loyalties were vague and indefinite. Slade was like quicksilver, flowing always to the lowest spot, following the line of least resistance.

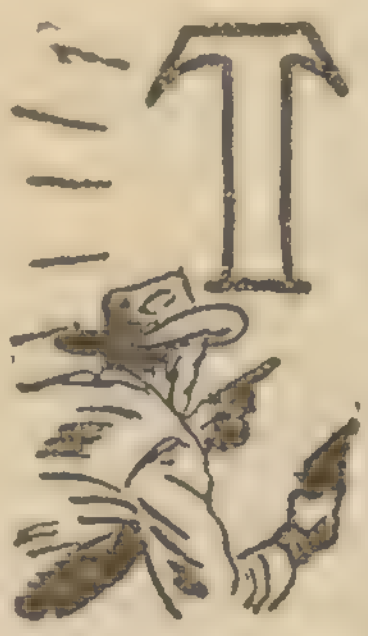
"What of his wife?" Steve asked, almost fearful of the answer. His sister, he felt sure, would have none of Slade's lust for power.

"He has three," Reagon O'Connor rose to his feet, indicating that the conversation was over. The Irishman's faith prevented him saying one word against his brothers.

"I'm asking about the woman who came here with him," Steve said bluntly.

O'Connor stood on the edge of the verandah, his hand upon the latch of the door. "No one came with him," was his reply. "Slade entered Deseret alone. A man was with him—Morgan was his name—and they had money. But, no woman."

2



THEY SPREAD their bedrolls on the fragrant hay in the barn. "Now, Steve," Curly John said soothingly, "Head into this thing with your saddle tight. Maybe the old man was just yarnin' ye, maybe not; we'll find it out in due time. It won't do a bit of good to get the hull Mormon Church on your tail."

"It wasn't your sister," Steve replied shortly and was immediately ashamed of his truculence.

"Gawd and feathers!" Curly ejaculated. "Didn't I practically hand raise her from a whelp? Didn't she spend more time on my knee than her natural mother's? Dammit, boy, she run off with Slade; we was told that clean back at Nauvoo on the

Missouri. She didn't just vanish. We'll run across sign."

In a matter of minutes, the rasp of snoring gave proof that Curly John, with the wisdom of his years, had sought refuge in sleep.

As for Steve, the night was long and the hours stood end to end, his sister's face too fresh in his mind. There had been only the two of them in the family, Marge and Steve, and they were closer for that reason. Marge, who rode a horse like a man, and thought like an angel. The companion of his youth and the favorite of the kindly Curly John Myers. And, somewhere in Deseret, was Sam Slade, the man who had lied to Marge Farrell.

Steve cursed, even as sleep claimed him.

●

Soon after daybreak, Steve was at the watering trough, splashing the cool liquid as he washed his face. Early as the hour was, the sun sent its white rays glancing against the sea of sand that washed eternally against the little island of greenery that Reagon O'Connor had built. Nights were cool in Deseret, but the days were tormenting.

Curly John came from the barn, rubbing sleep from his eyes, and made a sound like a playful porpoise as he ducked his head into the trough and came up, combing his beard with his dripping fingers.

"That stack of hay," was his opinion, "sure as Hell beats the soft side of a rock. Between the saddle and the stones we've slept on, my back was feelin' like a busted teepee pole."

Perhaps because of the nature of their talk the night before, Reagon O'Connor was in a serious mood as they sat down to breakfast. As the old man murmured a prayer over the food, Steve looked up to find Bess' dark eyes fixed on him.

She flushed faintly and turned away. Her skin, despite her rigorous life, was clear and fair, with the suggestion of a blush on her cheeks. Her lips, Steve noted, were full and firm. Her teeth, when she smiled—which was not too often—were startlingly white.

Robert, the youngest O'Connor, as was his custom, said nothing, keeping his eleven-year-old thoughts to himself. As soon as he had finished eating he mumbled a sort of apology and left, presumably to see about some of the chores. In a Mormon family, everyone worked.

Reagon's wife served the meal and watched in silence as the men ate. Steve was soon to find that a Mormon woman kept her place in the home, rarely stepping over that intangible, but very real, boundary line. Even a daughter was, in too many cases, a chattel, a bit of marketable merchandise.

STEVE WAS alone, standing by one of the trees Reagon had so carefully transplanted, when he heard a light footstep close behind him. It was Bess, bareheaded, and with the sleeves of her heavy dress pulled up to her elbows. She was strangely shy and at the same time forward. It was out of character for a woman of her faith to go with head and arms bare. Her brown eyes were firm as she looked into his face.

"What is it thee would know about Bishop Slade?" she asked, with a lack of deviousness that was part of her character.

Steve turned to her in amazement. "How did you know? he queried. He

was sure O'Connor would tell his women nothing of their conversation. "You were...." He stopped and looked at her in mock severity as he began to understand. "I see."

"Yes," she admitted in some confusion. "I was again by the window."

He laughed, and she laughed with him, and the sound of their merriment reached the ears of Curly John who was mending riding gear in the dimness of the barn.

"Gawd and feathers," the old man said, sucking his finger which he had pierced with O'Connor's sewing awl. "Not only would the lad tilt at the Mormon Church; now he would make love to their women." Shaking his head dolefully, the curls about his ears swinging, he returned to his work.

Steve was thinking. It would not do to let this girl know his real intent. Perhaps he had spoken too freely, even with O'Connor. "Slade is a relative of mine," he finally compromised. "He married my sister."

What he did not add was that he would never have claimed the arrogant Slade for a relative—even if there had been a marriage—unless some sort of falsehood was necessary. It was beginning to appear as if Marge Farrell, falling easy prey to a man of Slade's questionable talents, had gone with him willingly—at least as far as Nauvoo, the Mormon outpost on the Missouri River. But there had been no record of any marriage; it was at Nauvoo that the girl's trail ended.

"Bishop Slade comes here often," Bess O'Connor broke into his chain of thought; "he is quite friendly."

"I'll bet he is," Steve said, reflecting grimly upon what an oily, slick-tongued customer the hawk-nosed man could be. He heard O'Connor's heavy voice from the direction of the barn, and Bess turned to leave. It might arouse the old man's displeasure, Steve knew, for her to be in intimate conversation with a Gentile. But acting on some unfathomed impulse, he reached out and caught her slim arm.

"What is Sam Slade to you?" he asked bluntly.

Bess looked up at him, taking a short step to regain her balance from his abrupt movement. Her dark eyes were wide with emotion, and Steve felt it wasn't anger—though her full lips trembled. It was then that Farrell was given yet another reason for hunting out Sam Slade.

"I am promised to him," Bess replied simply; something like a sob tore at her throat as she fled toward the house.

CURLY JOHN looked up from taking the last stitches in his repair job as Steve angrily entered the barn. Even in the dimness in the hulking structure, Curly could see that Steve was oddly upset. The younger man took his saddle and bridle from where they were hung on a stall post and lugged them to the door. Then, throwing his saddle-blanket over his arm, he went after his black gelding.

"Well," said Curly John, thoughtfully rubbing his beard with his gnarled fingers, "looks like you're kinda in a hurry."

Steve turned. "You stay here with the mules," he directed; "I'm heading for Salt Lake City."

Curly shook his head and the ear length ringlets, now shot with gray, shook about his neck. "Nay, lad," he replied. "The durn mules will hafta look after themselves; I'm ridin' with ye."

●

It was mid-morning when they struck out east from the O'Connor farm toward the Wasatch. "We'll come into Salt Lake City from the north," Steve decided. "The mountain trail is rough, but we'll have cooler going and fresh water."

Curly John said nothing but, looking behind at the neat white house beneath the trees, he saw the window curtain move restlessly. He smiled in

his complacent way. Reading Steve Farrell like the open book he was, the older man divined the reason for the young man's haste to settle with Sam Slade. And, beneath his calm exterior, Curly John was also seething with subdued anger; he desired nothing more than seeing the girl he loved as a daughter, Steve's sister, avenged—and to find Steve himself safe at the end of his long trail.

But to Bess O'Connor, who watched the two of them ride away, there could be no such promise of peace. Her heart was more deeply troubled than she would have cared to admit at Steve's abrupt departure and, Mormon though she was, and betrothed to a Mormon, something vital about the young Gentile lingered in her memory.

Try as she would to shut her mind and make her mental footsteps follow the path of duty taught by her parents, her thoughts continued to stray to Steve Farrell. Holding the younger man in opposition to Sam Slade, her Bishop had been found waiting. However, so deep was her sense of duty she would not allow herself to question the issue.

It was for Bess O'Connor to wait, and mutely wonder at the strange turmoil in her heart.

And Steve, though his mind was full of thoughts of vengeance against Slade, found himself remembering the dark-haired Bess. At just such odd moments as when he and Curly John would rest their horses after a particularly arduous bit of trail, the slim, brown-eyed girl would intrude herself upon his thoughts. And, Steve found, he rather welcomed the intrusion. However, being a Gentile, and an open enemy of the strongest man in the Mormon Church, Steve suffered under no delusions as to the success of his cause as far as Bess was concerned.

AT LAST, after a dry camp in the remote fastness of the Wasatch, Steve and Curly John saw the orderly streets of the Mormon capital before them. Sprawled along the shores of the Great Salt Lake, the wisdom of the city's founding fathers was apparent when one caught glimpses of the wide streets and green parkways.

Though the State of Deseret, as the Mormons called Utah Territory, was under martial law by decree of Brigham Young, the Utah Expedition launched by Millard Fillmore had proved a military fiasco, an abortive and costly experiment. Trouble in Deseret between Gentile and Mormon, the reason given for the troops in the Territory, had proven nonexistent.

Within the city proper, a gathering place for almost eight-thousand souls, Farrell and Curly John drew not so much as a second glance. Dust-covered, weary with the many miles of trail behind them, there was nothing to set them apart from range-stained cowmen and ragged prospectors who thronged the streets. All about the pair were the harsh sibilants of the Easterners and the quaint, drawling patois of the Mormon, mingling into the conglomerate voice of the City. And, too, over it all, was the sober miasma of the Great Dead Sea.

"You'll be havin' a hell of a time," Curly John said conversationally, "findin' Slade in this mess."

"Slade won't be too hard to find," Steve replied, easing himself in the saddle and watching the flat-hatted, baggy-trousered Mormons going about their business of their own or of the Church of Latter Day Saints. "Trouble is, what will we do with him?"

It was obvious, even to the hot-headed Farrell, that any attack on Slade in this Mormon stronghold would merely loose the conglomerate wrath of the city upon him and Curly John.

Steve stopped talking, his black eyes hard, staring from under the brim of his broad hat at the milling crowd along the planked sidewalk. His unsmiling mouth was hardset, his face stern and uncompromising under a week's beard. With him constantly, day and night, was his terrible hatred of Sam Slade, mingled with the eternal question of Marge's fate.

While Slade's trail led plainly from Nauvoo, the girl had apparently vanished from the face of the earth. There was double purpose in Steve's determination. First, to know for sure his sister's eventual fate at Slade's hands; then to punish the man who had seduced her.

"Let's eat," he told Curly John, shaking off the oppression of his mood. "Then we'll make talk about Slade."

"The best way to sneak up on Slade," Curly John said later, as he propped his elbows on the hitching rack in front of a Mormon cafe and stuck a toothpick in his mouth, "is from the front."

Steve, his fingers catching the reins of his bridle, weighed the old man's words. As he swung aboard his gelding, Curly John, muttering, slid a foot into a stirrup and descended heavily a'straddle his bay.

Certainly, Steve reflected, any overt movement here in the City would be worse than foolhardy. Not only would it be his neck, but Curly John's. That was the real burr under his saddle; the old cowman had dealt himself a hand in something that was totally Steve's affair. However, knowing the deep regard Curly John had held for Marge, Steve couldn't have refused him a part in the drama had the old man asked.

Through the orderly streets of the city the pair rode. Now and again a horde of men, fresh with the yellow lust of a strike in the mountains, would charge into the street, and Steve's nervous black would canter and side-step, the red around his flaring eyes showing in the flickering torch light. Deseret was a land of plenty. There was trapping in the mountain streams, gold to be had in the gulleys, and wealth flowed like water in Salt Lake City.

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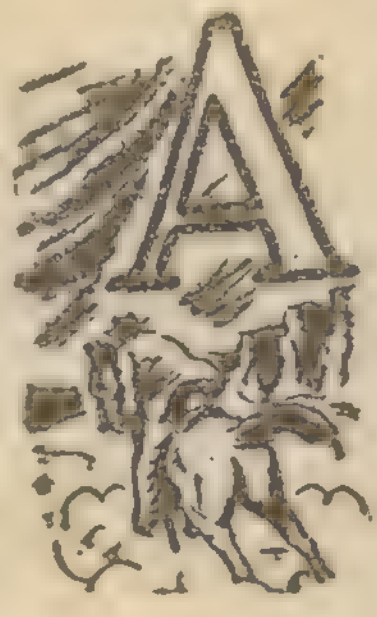

ASKING casually about Slade, whenever the occasion presented itself, Steve and Curly John made their way toward the center of the city where the new temple was under construction. Partly finished, its limestone structure thrust against the sky, bathed white in the sunshine.

Steve leaned across the neck of his horse and the ebon butts of his hand guns glinted. A workman, his face filled to the creases with limestone dust, looked up.

"Where'll we find Sam Slade?" Steve asked.

"Bishop Slade?" The mason hefted his chipping hammer as if assessing the weight. "I don't know," he replied, watching them from close set eyes; "he hasn't been around for days."

He watched them, hiding his interest by bending over his work as they rode on. It was not often that two such men, travel-stained and well-armed, inquired about Bishop Slade. The workman paused, a speculative

gleam in his eyes. It was just barely possible that Slade would be glad to know of these two; he cast aside his leather apron and vanished between the standing walls of the temple.

At nightfall, Steve and Curly John were saddle-sore and weary of Salt Lake City, but there was still no sign of the elusive Slade.

"He's jumped the range," Myers grunted as he swung from the saddle in front of a promising livery stable.

Steve shook his head. "I don't like it," he replied thoughtfully; "it's almost as if he knew we were here looking for him." He led his black gelding to the stable door.

The liveryman was old and looked as if he was still shoeing a horse. He was bent with the years until his arms almost touched the floor. Crafty eyes peered from under the cornice of matted, graying hair.

He clucked about the horses, rubbing their withers, making strange little sounds in the back of his throat. It was only when he opened his mouth that Steve saw that the man's tongue had been forcibly hacked out. With an ill-concealed shudder, the younger man waited for Curly John to make the arrangements for the care of the horses.

Steve, remembering, then asked the routine question concerning Slade's whereabouts but the hunch-back merely shrugged. A gleam of interest lighted his eyes, but it was quickly extinguished, as if a curtain had been dropped.

"That man," was Curly John's later opinion, "has led a rough life."

AS EARLY as Steve and Curly John were up the next morning, they found the mute at the livery stable there before them. Both Steve and Curly had slept well, and breakfasted amply. If it hadn't been for the ominous question in both of their minds, they would have been at peace with the world. But to Steve, at least, the memories of his sister and Slade's seduction of her, plus the ever-present thoughts concerning Bess O'Connor, prevented his forgetting the task ahead of them.

Far from being forgotten, Bess, the vibrant daughter of the taciturn Mormon was always before the eye of his mind. Her last words to him, when she had admitted her betrothal to Slade, had been bitter as alum to Farrell. Worlds separated the two of them, Gentile and Mormon, but Steve explained it away, in his own heart, by feeling that Bess O'Connor was too good a woman for Sam Slade. His own growing interest, Steve would have been the last to admit.

His gelding, Steve found, had been well cared for, the animal's black coat was shining with a thorough brushing and the saddle had been newly soaped until it gleamed in the wan light of the stable.

The mute, making his strange sounds, his gnarled hands tightening the cinches, checking bridle leather, hopped about like an ungainly frog.

Steve paid the man for the work he had done and, as Steve and Curly John threw legs over their saddles, the mute seemed lost in deep thought. As though coming abruptly to some decision, he reached for a currycomb and began scratching in the soft dirt of the stable floor.

"Slade?"

Steve looked at Curly John and a flash of fire gleamed deep within his dark eyes. He nodded, and watched the stableman drop awkwardly to his knees. Again the scratching on the dirt floor. It was obvious that the man was almost a stranger to the written word. As he bent over his task, in deep concentration, the mute allowed the pageantry of his emotions to play over his craggy face. First, decision, then fear, and finally anger as he spelled the last word.

Go into Wasath fer wud fer house.

"He means the mountains," Curly John guessed; "wood's scarce around the flats here and Slade's out where the tall timber grows."

The hunchback, hearing and understanding Curly's words, but unable to make intelligible answer, made his queer animal-like grunting sounds as the pair reined their horses out into the middle of the dusty street. He was still watching, his colorless eyes inscrutable, as Steve and Curly John rode away toward the haze of the foothills of the Wasatch.

But Curly John, older and wiser in the ways of the trail than his young friend, was strangely thoughtful. "Slade and his bunch just might be fixin' to whicker us," he warned. "This hull town's behind him; maybe even the mute, Morgan, is wearin' his brand."

A bell rang in Steve's memory and he whirled in the saddle. "What was his name?"

Curly John shrugged. "Morgan. Leastwise that was the name on the front of the stable."

Steve swore softly. "Remember," he asked excitedly. "Reagon O'Connor told us that when Slade came to Deseret he was accompanied by one man?"

"Yeah," Curly John spat a sliver of grass between the ears of his bay. "So?"

"That man's name was Morgan."

Curly John said nothing, but he kept an alert eye on the back trail until they were in the shadows of the first of the trees. If the mute were the same Morgan, then he was a buddy of Slade's; it was likely then that he was directing Steve and Myers into some sort of trap.

"Anyhow," Curly John muttered to himself, "we'll certain sure find out."

He twisted his lips in a tuneless whistle. "Only old squaws and camp dogs worry, anyhow," he told himself. "I'm as bad as a jittery woman."

●

TWICE DURING the long afternoon, riders had been sighted on the rimrock but the faint haze that told of coming twilight found Steve and Curly John not yet in contact with Slade nor his men. The horses were tiring from the hours of treacherous going and Steve and Myers were saddle-weary.

"It's no use slidin' around in the dark," Curly John said finally. "We'd better bed down for the night and try again in the mornin'."

As loathe as Steve was to give up the hunt—daylight again might find Slade miles farther away—he knew that the old man spoke wisdom; nothing could be done with weary minds and tired horses.

It was a dry camp, in a little wash deep in the glowering cliffs of the Wasatch. Steve and Myers munched the dry food they had brought from Salt Lake City while the horses, having been watered at the last creek, cropped at the short grass of the valley floor.

"We'd better sleep turn about," Curly John said, wiping crumbs from his beard with the back of his hand. "Gawd only knows what's loose in these hills."

He checked the priming of his heavy Navy pistol and laid the long gun across his knees. "First watch for me," he told Steve. For some minutes they talked in the darkness, then Steve, throwing his bedroll over one broad shoulder, headed for an overhanging rock. Curly heard a rustle in the leaves as Steve rolled out his bed, then silence.

After a moment, tiny sounds crept into the night. A bird whimpered and chirped sleepily in a scrub-pine and something slithered over the loose rocks behind Curly John. Without looking, the old man knew that a lizard had holed up for the night.

A little breeze whispered in the tops of the trees on the rimrock and Curly heard the sounds of the horses as they lay down.

To his nostrils came the pungency of sweat from the saddle serving as a prop for his back, mixed with the clean odor of saddle soap and leather.

Then again the night was still and the stars looked down casting a faint, ghostly light into the shadow under the trees. Curly noted with satisfac-

tion that Steve's bed-down was out of sight in the darkness and that the horses were quiet.

The Big Dipper wheeled about, pointing its handle at Polaris, and it was time to awaken Steve for his turn at night guard.

"I'll let him sleep just an hour more," Curly John told himself. "The lad is needin' sleep."

In so few words was the death-warrant of a man executed and signed. Curly John Myers dozed, his hand on his revolver.

THE FIRE that seemed to descend from the heavens curved in a mighty arc from the lip of the rimrock to land in the leaves on the valley floor. Scarce had the flaming pitch-pine fired the dry litter, than another dropped beside it. The entire dry wash was illuminated by the flaring pitch knots and the cliffs were chalky with light.

Curly John, knuckling sleep from his eyes, found his heavy pistol gone from his knees. His groping hand touched it where it lay on the dirt beside him, but for the moment the weapon eluded him.

The first rattle of gunfire sounded and the edge of the cliff was lighted by the muzzle blasts.

Steve, half-drugged by sleep, fought his way free from his bedroll and came to his knees, a heavy pistol in each hand.

He heard the familiar booming of Curly's Navy pistol and the answering fire from the cliff. A ball struck the limestone behind him and ploughed an ugly streak into the hard face of the rock. Chips sprayed the base of his neck and Steve ducked, cursing.

The flaring pine had burned lower now, and shadows were again creeping under the trees. Then, before Steve's eyes, half-lighted against the pale stars, was the hulking form of a man.

The guns in Steve's hands bucked and there came answering fire from the hillside. A lance of pain tore at Steve's side, even as he saw the dim figure of his opponent twist and fall into a crumped heap. Fighting waves of nausea that threatened to engulf him, Steve half crawled to the valley floor.

Dimly, with only half his mind, he heard the excited plunging of the horse in the scrub.

His hand, as he drew it away from his wounded side, was warm and sticky with blood. Steve tried to remember, in his half-conscious condition, where it was that Curly John had been sitting.

Even the effort of movement became too great and the weariness came over him and the stars faded. Steve Farrell knew no more.

Afterward Steve realized that he couldn't have been unconscious more than a couple of hours. As he fought his way free from the blackness that clung to him, his first thought was much as his last one—the welfare of Curly John Myers. At the time of the ambush, the action had been much too swift even to look for the old man. The light had been too uncertain, tricky, to distinguish friend from foe.

It was almost daylight when Steve found his friend. Curly John was still breathing, although his big chest moved in convulsive jerks. The old man had crept under a jutting boulder, seeking protection. The big Navy pistol, all chambers emptied, still was clenched in his hand.

"Take it easy, old-timer," Steve said tenderly, cradling the man's head on his outflung leg. Though the wound in Steve's side had stopped bleeding, it had stiffened and lamed him.

Curly John Myers opened his eyes and, even then, Steve knew he was looking at the younger man for the last time.

"Went to sleep." Curly admitted; "deserved what I got. Glad you ain't hurt."

He closed his eyes again and swallowed, his thin throat moving convulsively. "Guess you'll have to go it alone," he said in a whisper. Steve shook him gently, waiting for his eyes to open. Curly's hand relaxed and the heavy pistol fell to the rocks, clattering in the stillness.

"Gawd and feathers!" the old man said, half-reverently. Then he was dead.

Steve picked up the old Navy gun, and blinded by the tears in his eyes, sat staring unseeingly at the chalky face of the eternal cliffs.

4

THE SALT flats were like an oven and the shadowy outlines of the Mormon city wavered in the thin air like a mirage. Riding his gelding and leading Curly John's bay, Steve Farrell fought his way across the hot land toward Salt Lake City.

He had buried Curly John in the fashion he knew the old man would have liked. Without pretense he had committed the body to a grave under a simple cairn of jagged rocks, and Steve's hands had been torn and bleeding by the time the last chunk of limestone was atop the pointed pile.

In addition, the wound in his side had reopened with the violent exercise and Steve's shirt and trouser leg was stained with crimson. He hadn't eaten since the last meal with Curly John and he was weak from exposure to the fierce heat.

Yet, deep within the subconscious core of his mind, burned the desire for revenge upon the men who had ambushed Curly John and himself. And, mingled with his anger was the terrible sorrow he felt at the old cowman's death. The loss was great to Steve, since John Myers had been his constant companion almost since boyhood and the oldster had been a second father to Steve's sister Marge.

More dead than alive he pulled his black gelding to a halt in front of the livery stable and sat reeling in the saddle.

The hunchbacked mute, Morgan, came hobbling forth and took the reins to lead both the animals out of the sunshine and into the coolness of the stable. Steve watched him silently, his black eyes venomous, sure in his own mind that Morgan had been the cause of he and Curly John riding into the deadly trap.

Holding to a rough hewn upright, Steve slid from the saddle and stood reeling in the open area between the stalls. "I'm here to settle with you, Morgan," he said flatly.

The mute turned and faced him and Steve noticed that the man's face was a bleeding mass of raw flesh. Morgan squatted and rubbed in the dirt with his finger, then indicated his wounded face. In crudely formed letters, Steve could read: *Slade pistol whipped me.*

"For telling us where he had gone?"

The mute nodded violently, his tongueless mouth open.

It was clear then to Steve that Slade, learning from his spies in Salt Lake City that Morgan had talked to Steve and Curly John, had punished the liveryman for meddling. The ambush in the Wasatch had been something conceived and executed purely upon the spur of the moment.

A life for a life, Steve thought wearily and slumped upon a keg full of

horseshoe nails. The air was cool in the stable and full of the clean smell of leather dressing and the acrid fumes from the faintly glowing forge in the open areaway. A stableman was veterinary, blacksmith and confessor west of the Missouri River.

MORGAN washed the ugly bullet furrow in Steve's side, making his clucking sounds of alarm, and bound the torn flesh with a bit of clean cloth, securing the whole thing with a tattered neckerchief.

Only then the mute again began his shapeless scratching in the dirt. *Git the other one?*

Steve knew he referred to Curly John.

"He never had a chance," he said bitterly. "Gunned in his sleep."

The stableman shook his head. *They all git away?* he asked in his queer signs.

Steve grunted, stretching to ease the tightness in his aching side. "I killed one of 'em," he replied; "left him lying on the rimrock for the buzzards."

The mute grunted queerly, and although the sound resembled nothing human, Steve knew he was laughing. Evidently this man was no longer any friend of Slade's.

Steve looked at his battered face again. The whipping Morgan had received had been severe, administered with the knife-sharp front sight of a heavy gun.

Sam Slade, Steve fully realized at that moment, was a tough customer to deal with.

That night he rested on the soft hay of the livery stable, eating his evening meal with the kindly hunchback. There was a reason for Steve's cultivating the liveryman, other than Morgan's apparent hatred for Slade. This mute might know something of Marge's fate since he and Slade had entered Deseret together; properly handled, this tongueless man might be a valuable ally.

As he lay alone with his thoughts after the mute had retired to his own bed in the back of the livery barn, Steve was prey to the ghosts of memory. His sister's elfin features swam before the eye of his mind and again he saw her riding, her long hair free in the wind of her own passage. Marge had been a girl who loved life and everyone in life. Of such impressionable stuff was she made that the oily Slade had no difficulty capturing her confidence.

Steve stirred restlessly and Marge's face was replaced by Curly John's craggy features. Steve thought of the lonely cairn of rock under the forbidding, eternal limestone cliffs and wondered if the old cowman could know of Steve's determination to end the long trial and end it quickly.

SOON AFTER daybreak, Steve was up, stirring about the liverybarn, and shortly Morgan arose to join him. On the tip of Steve's tongue were many questions, brought on by a sleepless night, but he did not ask them until after he and the mute had eaten.

The sun was bright, and the air clean. It was early enough that the heat of the day had not set in and the green of the city, visible from the open stable door, was fresh and colorful. The tall spires of the partly completed Mormon Temple could be clearly seen in the rare atmosphere.

A wagon creaked by, pulled by straining oxen, and the dust of the streets rose in tiny gouts of white alkali.

Somewhere, beyond sight but within earshot, a child shouted and a dog scampered by the door chasing a bit of stick which had been thrown before it. Then there were light footsteps and the excited voices of more children as they followed the animal.

Steve was sitting on the nail keg again, his knee caught in the checkrein of his clasped hands. *"Did you know Marge Farrell?"* he asked the mute.

Morgan nodded, and for an instant alarm flashed in the back of his eyes.

Steve dropped his foot to the dirt, leaned forward. "She was my sister," he said.

Morgan looked into the now empty street and made no move to write in the soft dirt at his feet.

"Is she alive?" Steve pressed.

The mute turned his shaggy head toward Steve and rubbed the points of his fingers against the now healing flesh on his cheeks.

Steve regarded him cooly. "Afraid?" he asked.

Morgan nodded, got to his feet and lumbered away to one of the stalls. In a moment he returned with Steve's gelding which he immediately saddled.

Steve stood beside the sleek side of the powerful animal and looked at Morgan with something akin to loathing in his dark eyes.

"I'm going after Slade," he said shortly, "When I find him, I'll kill him; maybe then you'll talk."

The hunchback remained motionless as Steve Farrell ducked under the sill of the open door and rode into the dusty street. The mute watched until Steve was long out of sight in the heat haze along the lake of salt. Then he took the seat on the nail keg Steve had so recently vacated and thoughtfully rubbed the soreness from his slashed face. And, as he sat there, the fear that had been in his eyes was slowly replaced by something else.

He was shaken by a gust of anger and rose to beat his big hands impotently against the rough-hewn planking of the stable wall.

ALTHOUGH refreshed by his night's rest, Steve was still terribly weakened by the loss of blood, and by mid-morning the heat, glancing from the white flats, was almost unbearable. It was his plan to go to O'Connor's, rest and talk with the old man. It might be that some opportunity would present itself to even the score with Sam Slade after he had regained his strength.

That he hoped to see Bess, Steve wouldn't admit, even to himself. Even with the tragedy of Curly John's death, Bess O'Connor had remained a part of his thoughts. As he rode along, in spite of his weakness, he found his excitement increasing as he approached the O'Connor farm.

He kneed his gelding into a faster walk—a canter would have been suicidal for both man and horse in the heat—and leaned over the flat horn of his saddle to ease the soreness of his side.

Just ahead, where the roadway passed through the very fringe of the foothill, a few stunted trees grew. Although sparse, the growth prevented a clear view of the trail as it topped a slight rise.

To Steve's ears came the faint sound of iron tires in the sand and the snorting of pulling oxen. Mixed in was the cantering shuffle of a horse's hooves. Steve's gelding drew a breath to nicker, but Steve, leaning still further over the horn, patted him sharply on the nose.

The well-trained animal was quiet as Steve reined him into the concealment of a stunted stand of pine, betraying his nervousness only by the agitation of his sleek ears.

Along the road he had just left, his face oddly sullen as he drove the oxen, rode Reagon O'Connor. With him, perched on the high seat, was Bess.

Her face was flushed, possibly with the heat of the trip, and the dry alkali dust had stained her dress. Her father stared grimly ahead of him, his mouth fixed in a straight line of determination.

But it was the man on the horse that drew Steve's eyes. Never could he, in a thousand years, have forgotten that swarthy-hawk-nosed countenance. The rider was a slim man, just under medium height. Brown hair, lying in sweeping curls, hung just below the brim of his flat crowned hat, hiding his ears with its sleek-brushed contour. His eyes were the cold gray of dead volcanic ash.

Steve rode abruptly into the roadway, behind the wagon and abreast of the man on the black stockinged bay.

"Hello, Slade," Steve said bitterly. "We've got something to talk about."

BISHOP SLADE regarded Steve coolly, his eyes flicking for a brief instant to where the tailgate of the O'Connor wagon was dropping over the hill. "Hullo, Farrell," he said easily.

His keen glance took in the stained bandage at Steve's side, then dropped to the black butts of the heavy guns.

"Bear-hunting?" Slade asked quietly.

Steve shook his head, and his gelding took a nervous step nearer the other's horse. "Skunk," Steve replied tonelessly.

Anger flared in Slade's muddy eyes, but his smile was amused. "Haven't you had enough?" he asked, with another quick glance toward the wagon.

O'Connor, either failing to notice Steve, or carefully avoiding what he felt to be none of his business, had pulled out of sight. Listening for the creaking of the harness or the sounds of the laboring oxen, Steve knew that the Irishman had stopped just beyond the rise.

"Get off your horse," Steve said abruptly, bitterly. "Unless you want to die in the saddle."

Slade watched him calmly, but obediently slide into the road, his shiny boots scuffing up little clouds of white dust. Flipping a leg over his saddle horn, Steve dismounted, to stand scarcely ten feet from his enemy.

"You can start shooting anytime," he said quietly.

Slade hooked his thumbs under the edge of his vest and smiled his queer smile. "You fool," he said softly, "I'm not armed."

It was true. Outwardly, at least, there was no suggestive bulk of a shoulder gun under Slade's tight coat, nor were there any weapons at his slim hips.

The moments marched by as Steve and Slade regarded each other. A lizard scurried from a hot rock to the hotter sand then back to the rock again, his mouth open and his fat sides swelling with his breathing. A bird flew down and began pecking at something in the road, only to soar upward in alarm upon sight of the two men.

Steve spoke again and his words were like the measured beat of a metronome, striking at Slade like blows. "What happened to Marge Farrell?" he asked.

For the first time a sort of fear appeared in Slade's eyes and he wet his lips with the tip of his tongue. "She's dead," he replied, thinking quickly. "But I had nothing to do with it; she was taken by pneumonia a month out of Nauvoo."

"You're a liar!"

Slade shrugged at Steve's hot words, but said no more.

"You soft-talked her into going with you, then you killed her."

Slade shook his head. "It was pneumonia," he repeated stubbornly; "I loved her."

Steve watched Slade's eyes and anger grew within him until it was a racing flood that knew no boundaries.

"Like you do your three later wives?"

"That's my business," Slade snapped, and it was evident that Steve was beginning to get under his skin at last.

Laughing, Steve unfastened his heavy gunbelt and let his weapons fall to the dust. "I'm ready," he said. "Dog eat dog."

SLADE TOOK a step in his direction and Steve could see triumph in his eyes. A tocsin sounded in Steve's brain, a warning. This was a trick; Slade had an ace up his sleeve. Too late he saw the man slip a Derringer into his long fingers and thumb back the hammer. The half-inch bore of the hide-out gun centered on his face until Steve could almost look down the barrel.

"You fool," Slade gritted. "You poor, dead fool."

A gun belched flame and the narrow glen rocked with the concussion of ex-

ploding black powder. Dropping, Steve scooped up his guns and threw lead in flame at the elusive figure. Slade shifted in the gunsmoke, the Derringer in his hand flared and the heavy ball plowed into the sand at Steve's feet.

Then a wave of blackness swept over Steve Farrell and the dry alkali of the trial came forcibly up to meet him. It forced its bitterness into his nostrils and his gasping mouth. Then, seemingly after an eternity, all of it was gone...

●

Reagon O'Connor walked softly into the barn where Steve was finishing his saddling chore.

"Thou art leaving, then?" the big Irishman queried.

Steve nodded, bending needlessly to a saddle girth to hide the misery in his eyes. Absently, O'Connor stroked the gelding's black mane. When he spoke, he had changed the subject. "Morgan," he said, "is recovering."

"I'm glad." Steve straightened. "I owe him a lot."

Reagon smiled. "It is odd," he went on, half to himself. "A Mormon mute it was who finally told thee thy sister's fate. Forced to ride with Slade, who attacked a helpless prospector's train, she was mistaken for a man and shot. It was a mute who told thou where Slade might be found. And it was the same man who, following thy trail, fired the shot that saved your life."

Steve faced him grimly. "You're trying to tell me something," he said. "What is it?"

It was true that his debt to Morgan was a great one. He fired at Slade at the moment that the Mormon Bishop had leveled his hideout gun at Steve. Riding along Steve's back-trail, waiting for revenge upon Slade who had tortured him, the mute had seen his chance. It was the liveryman, too, who by his laborious crawl, had told of Marge Farrell's fate. Having ridden with Slade at the time of the pack-train robbery, Morgan had had his tongue ripped out by Slade to insure his silence.

Reagon's voice jerked Steve from his thoughts. "I am only telling thee this," the Irishman said; "the evil is not in the Mormon, but in the man."

STEVE led his horse into the barn-lot, O'Connor a step behind. The curtain at the kitchen window stirred and dropped into place. The door opened and Bess, her lovely hair flying, ran into the yard.

It was with a strangely satisfied smile that O'Connor vanished into the barn. "Thou wilt not be in a great hurry now, my son," he muttered. "There is a young lady who would have thee stay."

Bess stood beside the glossy shoulder of the big black gelding and looked up into Steve's face. Her brown eyes were wide and a faint flush stained her cheeks. "I have been praying for thee," she said softly.

Steve looked down and sadness tightened his cheeks. "How about Slade?" he asked.

"I am sorry for death," She returned simply, "but I cared nothing for the man."

Steve slid from the saddle, happiness lighting his black eyes.

"Where are you going now?" the girl queried softly.

"I don't know." Steve's eyes were sad as he thought again of Curly John. The trail would be long and lonely without the man who had been almost a father to him. With the death of John Myers, and of Slade, it seemed to Steve that much of the purpose of his life was gone. He was as empty, as dead, as the Great Salt Lake itself.

"Why," he asked suddenly, "were you praying for me?"

There was a deep silence and Steve's gelding, eager for the road, tossed his head and excitedly pawed the earth. A bird sang, hidden somewhere in the trees Reagon O'Connor had so painstakingly transplanted.

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Rosa fell in love with Bitter Creek Newcomb, of the Doolin gang.

ROSE OF CIMARRON

A TRUE STORY

Of A Great Romance

By ALLAN K. ECHOLS

THE GANG of outlaws who rode with the notorious Bill Doolin in the wild days, at the turn of the century in Oklahoma Territory, was as unusual a group of characters as ever assembled under one leader. Most bandits are poured out of the same mould—thieves and cutthroats who gather together to augment their own strength and protection.

In this, as in many other ways, the Doolin gang was a group of individuals, people with different backgrounds and with a strange assortment of reasons for hitting the long trail. Doolin himself was a smart cowman—an unusual administrator—a man who kept a wife and family in the background, and who was eventually captured in his effort to get his family and himself out of the country so that he could retire from banditry and live in peace with the wife and daughter whom he loved. He had been the brains of the Dalton gang up until the time of the Daltons' disastrous effort to rob two banks at once in Coffeyville, Kansas; he had ducked out of that one, knowing its probable failure.

Bill Dalton, the only Dalton left, was now one of Doolin's strange collection of characters. Dalton had not ridden with his notorious brothers; he had been a respectable business man and a member of the California legislature when his brothers' notoriety had broken his spirit. The humiliation

Who was the famous "Rose of the Cimarron"? No one knows—that is, the few who did know have never told. But why was it that the lawmen who pursued and finally captured her, who knew her and her outlaw companions, and the judge who sentenced her all conspired to keep her secret?

brought on him had driven him from respectability; and he slunk back to Oklahoma and, in his bitterness at the people who had snubbed him on account of his brothers' reputations, had joined up with Doolin. A law maker turned bandit.

Arkansas Tom was the son of a successful merchant and the brother of two preachers; he had almost become a preacher himself. His picture shows the face of a man who could have been a classic poet or painter, and he had an education to fit the role. He served a term in prison, reformed, was paroled and lived respectably a while, then suddenly turned bank robber again and was killed in a gun battle. It was he who surrendered to the officers in the famous Battle of Ingalls as a gallant gesture to the woman who ran the hotel around which the fight took place, thus saving her building from being burned.

There was Tulsa Jack, the dude, who wore a broadcloth coat with velvet lapels. And there was Little Dick West, who boasted that he had been born on an open prairie and had never slept under a roof in his life. The roof of a Federal prison had the honor of breaking up that long record.

And then there was that most mysterious of women perhaps in the whole history of Southwestern Outlawry—Rose of Cimarron. She was fourteen years old when she fell in love with Bitter Creek Newcomb and only seventeen years old when the battle of Ingalls took place. Newcomb was one of the handsomest and most gentlemanly outlaws who ever died under the lead of the law. He was the son of a prosperous Kansas merchant, and had good background, breeding and education.

It was the strange love between this beautiful, mysterious girl and Newcomb which started the legend that now abounds with a thousand undoubtedly fanciful tales of Rose of Cimarron. As is so often the case, it is probable that these tales multiplied because there was so little actually known about her, and because the little that was known left so much to the imagination. Southwesterners like nothing better than using their imaginations to fill in the gaps between scattered facts.

ONE REASON for this lack of factual information was the secrecy with which Doolin, this most canny of outlaws, operated. Another reason for the secrecy about the girl was the extraordinary reticence of any of the outlaws themselves to talk about her.

Many women outlaws have held the respect of their companions for one reason or another, but Rose of Cimarron was perhaps the only one known to have been respected for virtue! Red Buck Waightman was an outlaw so mean and cruel that Doolin eventually kicked him out of the gang as being too ornery for a decent outlaw to associate with; but even Red Buck worshiped Rose, and watched his actions and his talk in her presence.

But the most unusual reason of all for the lack of actual knowledge of Rose of Cimarron was in the reticence of the officers themselves in discussing her. Not more than a handful of men knew her actual name, and most of these were officers. And it was the officers themselves who were the ones most determined that her identity be concealed; they knew her story, and for that reason their tongues were sealed.

The reason this reticence was that Rose of Cimarron was a girl of virtue. She was the young daughter of a Texan who had moved up into Oklahoma and was the respectable owner of a substantial ranch. She met Bitter Creek Newcomb somewhere and fell deeply in love with him. Bitter Creek, having a background of respectability and education, as she had, was equally in love with her.

Her love seemed to be of the kind that classic novels are written about.

When she learned that Bitter Creek, who had been working as a cowboy, had become an outlaw, she followed him wherever the fortunes of the Doolin gang took them. The pair intended to be married some day, as soon as Bitter Creek got clear of the law. But in the meantime their love was as circumspect as that of any engaged couple of that period.

There were women camp followers wherever outlaws had stolen money to throw away, but Rose of Cimarron was not of that breed. As to her virtue, even the famous Deputy Marshal Bill Tilghman and his boss Marshal Nix, both familiar with the character of outlaws' women, took the stand on her behalf. At the time of his only capture, Doolin told Marshal Nix his opinion of the girl, and the Marshal knew when to believe Doolin and when not to. Nix believed Doolin, whose story merely verified his own investigations.

Quoting Marshal Nix, who eventually broke up the gang, Bill Tilghman brought the girl in and placed her in jail, not because of any danger of further outlawry from her, but because they were trying to catch Doolin; they felt that her loyalty to her friends would interfere with their efforts. That had happened before, at the cost of the lives of two officers.

Tilghman said to Nix, to quote from Nix' privately printed memoirs, "Marshal, I'm almost ashamed of arresting that girl. She doesn't belong in our jail; I believe everything Doolin and others have said about her are true."

Quoting Nix again, the thing that Doolin had said about her when questioned at the time of his capture was the following, word for word: "Why, gentlemen, she was just a sweet little country girl who was unfortunate enough to fall in love with an outlaw. She would have laid down her life for Bitter Creek Newcomb, and he worshiped her...but not enough to go straight. Naturally, folks have suspected—well, you know what—but I'll swear she was as good a girl as ever lived. The entire gang worshiped her. If anybody had ever dared to intimate that she was not all a good woman should be, any one of the crowd would have killed her accuser instantly. Even Red Buck."

THE GIRL had fallen in love with Newcomb at the age of fourteen, and she had been with the bunch three years when the Battle of Ingalls took place. It was during this battle that she made the name for herself that started the legends.

No matter how spectacular and untrue the legends are, the facts about her at Ingalls are enough to have earned her a place in the history of Southwestern banditry. And they are substantiated by those of the officers who took part in the fight who lived to tell about it. That battle was of the stuff that fiction is—and has—been made. If the Battle of Ingalls sounds like fiction, it is because so much fiction sounds like the Battle of Ingalls.

These are the facts as related by Marshal Nix, who hounded the Doolins into boothill, but not without bloodshed on both sides. He ordered the battle—and lost it because of Rose of Cimarron.

Ingalls was a settlement in the edge of the Creek Nation, well off all beaten paths, and having no known reason for existence. Like outlaw towns in fiction, it was composed of a store, a saloon and a building which was called a hotel, run by a Mrs. Pierce, ably assisted by a few girls whose purpose in life was to make the outlaws' holidays pleasant and expensive. The few citizens of the town, including the owner of the *Trilby* saloon, were dependent on outlaw money for their board, washing and horse-feed, so that the welcome-mat was always out for the Doolins and other passing gentlemen of their profession. In short, Ingalls was literally the model for thousands of such towns in

the pages of fiction and on the movie screen today.

The Doolins appreciated the hospitality, and after Nix had discovered and hounded them out of their home in their twenty-five-horse-fifty-man cave, they took up residence on an abandoned ranch near Ingalls. Thus they could ride into the town three or four nights a week and enjoy the fruits of their toil and the benefits of contact with civilization as found in the *Trilby* and at Mary Pierce's Hotel.

Marshal Nix got word that the Doolins were frequently visiting Ingalls, and set about planning their capture. He organized a posse headed by Jim Masterson—a brother of the famous Bat Masterson, John Hixon, Lafe Shadley, Tom Houston, Dick Speed, and several more of his hundred-and-fifty deputies.

The posse loaded two wagons with enough supplies to last for several weeks, and arms enough to fight a war; then they set out for Ingalls. They posed as hunters, and stopped and camped and hunted along the way, so as to arouse no suspicion. Reaching a point near Ingalls, they made their camp and hunted from it daily while one or two of them would manage to go into Ingalls for supplies and look over the town.

They had been hunting game around Ingalls for three days when one of the deputies, who had ridden into town, came back to camp with the report that a gang had ridden in and had turned their horses into the livery stable. Then, according to the report, the gang had separated, some going directly to the *Trilby* saloon Hotel.

NOW THE men of the posse broke camp, hid themselves in the two covered wagons, and the drivers drove them toward Ingalls. They stopped in the concealment of a ravine and prepared for battle. Each man wore two cartridge belts, two six-shooters, and had a Winchester rifle. They stuffed their pockets with extra ammunition, and thus heavily armed, they scattered out of the wagons and surrounded the settlement.

Masterson was trying to get some of his men placed to command the entrance to the *Trilby* and the livery stable when he was spotted. The outlaws did not wait to palaver, but immediately started to open fire on the officers from inside the saloon.

Caught before they had got into position, Masterson, Hixon, Speed, Houston and Shadley were exposed to the fire. Having been shot at, all plans were called off and they started returning the fire. The Battle of Ingalls had started in a blaze of smoke as the officers poured lead into the *Trilby* from their exposed positions on the street, while bullets whined around their heads, coming from the protection of the saloon.

Then suddenly there was a commotion in the saloon and the gunfire from within died down. It was evident that somebody in the *Trilby* had been hit; the officers hoped that they had the bandits under control.

But they were disappointed; as the sound of firing from the saloon was stilled, bullets began flying around the heads of the officers from the second floor of the Pierce Hotel. Under cover of this new burst of gunfire, Bill Doolin himself emerged from the *Trilby* dragging a wounded man with him, trying to reach the safety of the livery stable where their horses were.

The man whom Doolin was dragging across the exposed street was Bitter Creek Newcomb. But he had got no farther than the middle of street when he himself cried out and stumbled as a bullet struck him; he had to drop Bitter Creek and look out for himself. Both he and Newcomb then started crawling on hands and knees in the dust through the hail of lead from the officers who in turn were having lead poured on them from the windows of the hotel.

Then more of the gang came out of

the saloon. Bill Dalton, Red Buck—the meanest outlaw in Oklahoma, and Dynamite Dick poured into the street, throwing bullet for bullet at the officers, covering Doolin and Bitter Creek until the wounded pair reached the safety of the livery stable. Behind its walls, they stopped and traded more lead with the officers.

Now the outlaws were under cover while the officers were still exposed. Deputy Tom Houston made a dash for the stable and an outlaw bullet killed him dead in his tracks. The others found scant protection. Masterson himself was behind a sapling tree only half the width of his body!

In the Pierce Hotel watching the battle was Rose of Cimarron. She saw her sweetheart, Bitter Creek, being brought wounded across the street. She saw Doolin fall with a bullet, and saw them both crawl toward the livery stable while the lead flew around the.

She knew that her sweetheart and Doolin had only such ammunition as was in their single belts, knew that Bitter Creek's life was in danger. She had to get to his side.

There was only one exit to the second floor of the hotel, and that was by an outside stairway exposed to the fire of the deputies. She took one look around, grabbed two blankets off a bed and made a rope out of them, tying one end to the leg of the bed, throwing the other end out of the window opposite the side of the building covered by the officers.

Then she gathered up two belts of cartridges and strapped them around her slim waist, and picked up a Winchester. And with this arsenal, she crawled out the second floor window and slid down the blankets to the ground.

She still had to cross a street under the open fire of the posse to reach the door of the livery stable. She did not falter a moment, but ducked her head and ran through that hail of lead from the hotel to the livery stable and disappeared within the door.

ANY ONE of the deputies could have killed her at will, but such was their respect for the reputation of the girl that they could not draw a bead on her, even though they knew that she was carrying needed ammunition to the outlaws. That ammunition could kill one of their own number, but the officers still withheld their fire on the girl.

This chivalry cost them dearly. Using the fresh ammunition Rose had brought them, Doolin killed Deputy Dick Speed while the rest of the gang got their horses saddled. Then they made their escape through the back door of the livery stable. It is significant here that Doolin, a man who—except for his outlaw activities—had a strong sense of right and wrong and common decency, stayed and covered the front door of the stable while his men and Rose helped the wounded Bitter Creek onto his horse and got him away. Only then did Doolin, wounded himself, mount his own horse and follow them.

A few minutes later the characters of some of the outlaws were again demonstrated. When Doolin caught up with his bunch which had ridden on ahead of him while he covered their escape, he saw that Rose and Bitter Creek were not with the bunch.

"Where's Rose and Bitter Creek?" Doolin asked.

Red Buck snorted. "Hell, we ain't got time to bother with them; he's shot, and he'll only hold us back."

Bill Doolin's gun blazed. Red Buck's hat jumped off his head, and his horse reared up. "Now." Doolin said, "you yellow-bellied coyote, turn around and ride back to where you left them; we're not riding without them."

Bitter Creek had been wounded so badly that despite the aid of Rose in supporting him, he was too weak to ride, and had fallen off his horse on the trail. The girl had stopped her own animal and dismounted, dragging her sweetheart into the edge of the woods. That was when Red Buck had

persuaded the others to ride on and leave them.

Now as they rode back, Bill Dalton, Doolin's right-hand man who had once been in the California Legislature, saw that Deputy Lafe Shadley had caught up with Bitter Creek and the girl. Still loath to take a shot at her, Shadley was slipping up on the pair to capture them alive.

Bill Dalton shot Shadley dead. Then Dalton and Doolin, Dynamite Dick and the unwilling Red Buck helped the girl get Bitter Creek back on his horse, and supported him as the group rode away.

Since the deputies had slipped up on the town afoot so as not to attract attention, they could not follow. The whole gang made its escape.

That is, all except Arkansas Tom, the man with the face and education and dreamy eyes of the classic poet. He was still hidden in Mary Pierce's hotel, where he had been since the fight started; it was he who had laid down the fire from the hotel window to cover Doolin's dash across the street with the wounded Bitter Creek.

The deputies were exposed to Arkansas' fire and could not get him out except by dynamiting the building. They were preparing to do this when Mrs. Pierce came out and begged them not to destroy it. They agreed only on condition that she bring Arkansas out unarmed. This was the famous occasion on which the lad with two brothers in the ministry and a rich father made his gallant gesture toward the woman whose girls made their living relieving his kind of their stolen money. He surrendered so that Mrs. Pierce could continue to have a roof under which to earn her bread and butter in her chosen profession.

An interesting sidelight on Arkansas Tom was the judge's lecture at his trial. His attorney pleaded for a light sentence because of his youth; he was only twenty-one, and had been influenced by bad company.

The judge gave him a fatherly lecture on bad company, and ended by saying, "And I hope this will be a lesson to you, so that when you come out of prison you wil' stay out of bad company and be a better man." Then he gave Arkansas fifty years in the Federal Penetentiary! Arkansas Tom would have been seventy-one years old when he walked out of the bad company of the prison to start being a better man.

THAT WAS the U. S. Marshal's version of what happened at the Battle of Ingalls, on which rested the fame of Rose of Cimarron. That was the one known and authenticated tale, and a thousand legends have sprung up in the absence of other known or authenticated facts about her.

Why then, the silence from the officers? Why did they not round out the story which they knew? The sequel answers that.

Doolin and the men under him were the worst thorns in the sides of the officers who were trying to rid the Territory of outlaws, and so the gang was relentlessly hunted down and killed. Charlie Pierce and Bitter Creek were trapped at a ranchhouse where Bitter Creek refused to surrender, and died with his boots on and his guns smoking.

When her sweetheart died, Rose of Cimarron had no further reason to ride with the Doolins, and she left them. But the officers knew of her steadfast loyalty to her friends, and they had to do something to keep her from making it more difficult for them to catch the Doolins. That was when Tilghman picked her up on a warrant charging her with harboring outlaws. This was not a great crime, inasmuch as perhaps half the ranchers in Oklahoma had harbored an outlaw from time to time. Because her reputation was so firmly fixed in the public mind, and because of her youth and character, she received a very light sentence and was put away in a girls' reforma-

tory, more to keep her from helping her friends than as punishment.

Her behavior in prison was perfect, and she was soon free; she was also free from her past life, free from the name that was growing to be a legend, a shadowy figure whom nobody knew, but about whom everybody had a story.

She came through her period of banditry and through her love of the handsome young outlaw at the age of eighteen just as she had entered it at the age of fourteen, a girl, in the words of Doolin, who was still everything a respectable woman ought to be.

Under her right name, she married a substantial stockman who never knew that she was the famous Rose of Cimarron. She raised a family of sons and daughters who never knew of her outlaw interlude; to her neighbors she was simply the beautiful wife of a stockman and his fine family, respected and loved by her neighbors.

If she is still alive today she would only be in her seventies. Her pictures show that—unlike most notorious women who are generally called pretty, unless they are downright ugly—she was a genuinely beautiful girl.

Rose of Cimarron may still be living, a beautiful and beloved grandmother. Nobody knows, and nobody will know, for the only ones who knew her real name and history—the very officers who fought and arrested her—Nix, Tilghman, Masterson, and the Judge who sentenced her—had so much respect for the fine qualities of the girl that they were the ones most eager not to dispel the silence behind which she found refuge and peace at last. Torture could not have made them expose her.

A love and loyalty rare among men led her to the very gates of hell, then led her back to security and happiness, and an understanding rare among hard-bitten peace officers led them to protect the peace she had found.

Yuh Don't Need a Lantern
to see that there are
10 Complete New Stories
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by A. A. Baker
in the October issue of

FAMOUS WESTERN

ILL WIND

COMPLETE NOVELET

By Robert Julian Rouco

THE PARCHED wind beat unceasingly against the rough boards of the one-room office and jail, hot and oppressive. Sometimes the gale mounted high enough to hurl small pebbles against the panes of the barred windows with a coarse rattle, sometimes diminished till the sound of driving sand was like that of sandpaper upon wood.

The air inside was stifling and parched as the wind. Stripped to his waist, Deputy Bill Gillis sat at his battered rolltop desk, trying to bemuse his wits by poring over a stack of dodgers. Dust which evaded all guile covered everything, and little runnels of sand lay along the floor joints. Grit had gathered over the doorsill and blanketed the window ledges.

The carbine leaning against the desk appeared to have been just fished from

a flour barrel, and the blued steel of the sawed-off shotgun on the deerhorn rack was lusterless as a mildewed sock. Despite Gillis' efforts to focus his thoughts, the rogue's gallery photos and accompanying captions kept dissolving into senseless gray blobs and meaningless chicken tracks.

Suddenly he slapped down the sheaf of circulars in disgust, and turned to glare balefully at the scraggly little gnome of a man who sat placidly reading a magazine on the bunk in the bearcage jail at the back of the single room. The little man looked up, caught the expression of fury on Gillis' face, and began to rock with silent mirth.

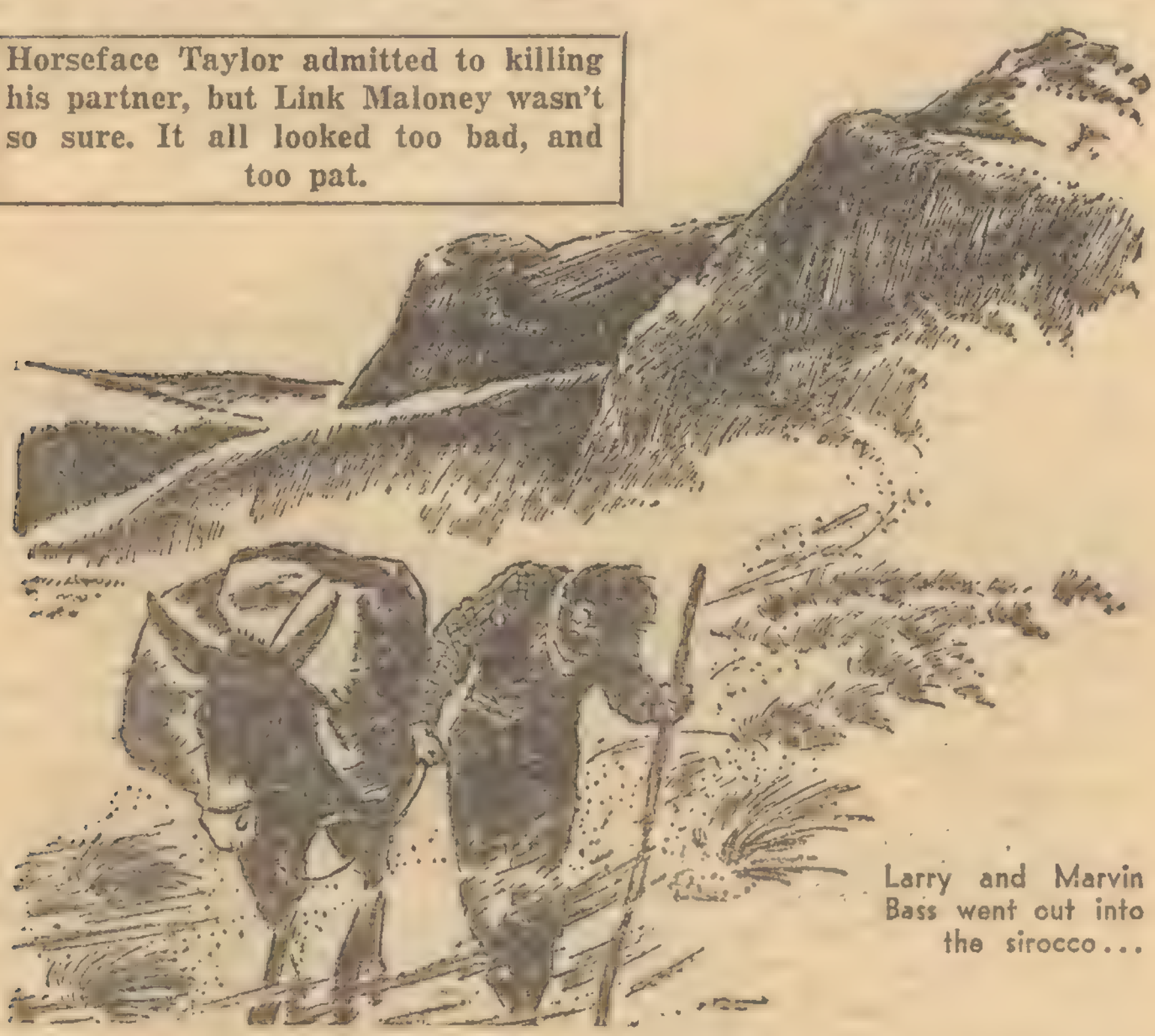
He seemed alarmingly frail beneath his ragged clothes, his unkempt salt-and-pepper hair and whiskers. Actually, he was sound of wind and limb, as tough and durable as boot-leather. The bright little eyes that now were twinkling with mockery at the deputy, last night had been dull and bloodshot when Bill had locked Link Maloney in the cage.

Gillis, sitting there glaring at Maloney through the cage bars, reflected resentfully that Link's horny hide was as impervious to the weather as his guts were to the gallons of bad whisky with which he habitually drenched his belly.

Link's equability suddenly became unbearable, and Gillis leaped from his chair and stood glowering at the little man on the bunk. "Laugh, damn your hide!" he bit out. "I'm glad some one still knows how to laugh; but for gawd's sake, what's funny?"

"You," chuckled the scrawny little

Horseface Taylor admitted to killing his partner, but Link Maloney wasn't so sure. It all looked too bad, and too pat.



Larry and Marvin Bass went out into the sirocco...

scarecrow. "It 'pears to me you're seein' things hind-side-before. By rights, you oughta lay back and laugh, while I do the bellerin' and rarin'. Know what a sirocco is?"

Gillis snatched his hat from the wall peg and sailed it against the bars with all his might; but the prisoner only continued his noiseless laughter as the crumpled Stetson dropped into the dust, and repeated his question. "Know what a sirocco is, Deputy?"

Gillis' homely face relaxed into a rueful grin. "Sure. Sort of a hot day desert wind, like what's been blowin' here for three days without a letup."

"Yeah." Maloney stopped laughing but his eyes still twinkled. "And when she blows, the natives sometimes grab pig-stickers and go to carvin' their names in gullets."

Gillis laughed shortly. "Meanin', I suppose, that you think I've let too much sand blow into my ears. Maybe you're right, Link. But this country doesn't need a sirocco to drive a man off his nut. Damn a place where whisky and water are hauled the same distance, and both are sold by the drink without enough left over for a man to wash his feet."

LINK ROSE from the bunk and leaned against the jail bars. The jail was too low for a tall man, the sides too close together to permit a six-footer to stretch out full length on the floor. There was a plenty of room for Link Maloney.

The little prisoner's expression turned sober. "I was just joshin', Deputy. All the same, men is pretty much the same the world over. Durin' a duster a year ago, Larry and Marvin Bass held up the *Nugget* saloon, robbed the customers and hit out in the storm. They must of had a fallin' out over the split somewhere between here and Fortymile Wells. Larry was found with a slug drilled through his right eye, and Marv was dug out of the sand where he died of thirst within a mile of the water hole. It 'peared he had been knocked off his horse with a bullet through the leg, and was too crippled to catch the critter again. You wasn't here then, but I reckon you heard about it. How'd you come to get stuck out here, Deputy?"

Gillis scowled. "I opened my yap and tripped on my tongue." He took out his watch, walked to his chair and took his shirt from the back of it. As he put on the shirt, he glanced back at his little prisoner. "I'm goin' outside a minute, Link. Want me to fetch you anything? Tobacco? Papers?"

"Nary a thing, thanks."

"Then take it easy till I get back; don't go runnin' off anywhere."

Link Maloney smiled faintly at the deputy's threadbare humor, and returned to the bunk and his magazine.

Gillis unlatched the door, and stepped out onto the leanto porch.

The time was a few seconds short of six, and Gillis faced into the wind to gaze expectantly up the barren gulch toward the gold mines, which were Black Rock's sole reason for existence. Despite the wind-borne particles biting into his cheeks, visibility was fairly good because of the lack of soil for the wind to churn into dust. Silently and fervently he cursed the desert in general, and the bonanza town of Black Rock in particular. Exile to this arid Siberia was the price he had paid for venturing to offer an honest opinion to the political figurehead who was sheriff of this county, which was larger than some states.

Abruptly at six o'clock, the whistle of the Lodestar mine shrilled quitting time, and was joined by varied shrieks from the Miller & Holliday, the Blue Queen and the Turquoise Belle. Before the inharmonious quartet of whistles reached full volume, streams of miners spilled from the shaft houses and down the catwalks, to mingle in a serpentine trudging down the bed of the gulch toward the sunburned and wind-buffeted cluster of hovels around Gillis's office and jail.

There were other workings besides the four operating mines, but none of them amounted to much; a few prospect holes and a few shafts of the corned or salted variety used as bait in the quasi-legitimate business of separating fools from their money.

A FEW YEARS ago, a desert rat called Far-gone Jim had discovered rich gold ore in this desolate crevice in the basalt and lava. Since then, Fargone had vindicated the judgement of whoever tagged him by selling his claim for a song and evaporating into the thin desert air. Four companies had preempted all valuable properties, leaving grifters, speculators and wishful prospectors to scramble for what remained.

Of the thousand-odd men who had clawed and scratched their way to Black Rock, four hundred were regularly employed in the mines. Most of the others of the thousand-odd lived off the earnings of the four hundred.

Before the first of the oncoming miners had tramped to within hailing distance, Gillis went back inside, still swearing under his breath. The spectacle of workmen carrying dinner buckets was the sole outward approximation of normal human existence of which the men of the town might boast, and even that was a gross illusion. These were not men, but automatons, driven by an obsession.

For twelve hours in the day they worked like subterranean beavers, and then—instead of returning to wives and families—filled their guts with sodden fodder from the hash house and spent the night drinking and gambling in the saloons. And yet, such was the strength of their obsession that they were able to draw upon some residual source of energy, for strength to pursue the monotonous cycle for weeks and months and years.

Gillis shrugged off the thought of such appalling monotony, and resumed his aimless perusal of the file of wanted men without appreciably better results than before. He was still aware of Maloney's amused glances, but he was too deflated by disgust to respond. When he found himself shuffling the circulars like cards, he shoved them into a pigeonhole and got a deck from a desk drawer.

Before the deputy had laid out his game of solitaire, the superannuated *paisano* who brought meals to the jail appeared with *frijoles*, coffee and *tortillas*.

Maloney slurped alternately from one tin cup and the other—one of beans and one of java—dunking *tortillas* indiscriminately into each. Gillis swallowed a few bites of the fiery Mexican dish and shoved back his plate, then sluiced his gullet with four cups of black coffee and returned to his brooding.

The wind had begun to bluster harder, throwing handfuls of rocks at the shack in gusts, then dropping to a murmur.

Then foreign sounds, sharp, yet muffled like rocks striking together under water, made themselves heard distinctly toward the end of a lull, then were drowned in a rattling shower of pebbles.

Gillis whirled and looked toward Link Maloney. "Hear that? Sounded like gun shots."

"Maybe. Or maybe a door slammin', or boulders fallin' from the cliff, Deputy."

"Sounded more like shots to me, Link."

The shriek of the wind and the clatter of gravel against the shack grew sharper as deputy and jailbird argued. Somehow, the significance of gunfire, if gunfire it was, failed to elicit any reaction from the numbness that was Bill Gillis' brain.

He would have ignored the knock on the door, had it not been backed up by a hoarse, urgent shout. "Open up, Deputy! For gawd's sake, open up!"

2

GILLIS went to the door, glowering, prepared to give someone a tongue lashing, and opened it.

Horseface Taylor, a towering skinny man, and George Kinkaid, a smooth-shaven sometime gambler and miner, stumbled across the threshold in a gust of wind and sand. The sight of them was a little startling to Gillis. Taylor's long thin face wore a stunned, tragic expression; Kinkaid's pleasant smooth countenance looked drawn and haggard.

Gillis bit back the bitter words he had framed for speech.

Link Maloney, his vision of the two men obscured by both the bars and the deputy, unaware of the shock-blanked faces of Taylor and Kinkaid, called out heartily to Taylor. "Sure nice of ye to come and call me out again, Horseface. But you needn't of bothered this time; I'm gettin' out tomorry anyway."

No one paid any attention to him. Taylor tried to speak to Gillis, but managed only to gasp like a fish out of water.

George Kinkaid spoke for him. "What Horseface is tryin' to tell you, Bill, is that he just shot and killed his partner, Hank Grommet."

"What!" And Gillis remembered numbly the words of Link's half-serious banter, *"when the sirocco blows, the natives sometimes grab pig-stickers and go to carvin' their names in gullets."*

Kinkaid said to Gillis, "I know how you feel, Bill; I didn't believe it at first, either. My shack is only a few paces down the gulch from theirs. Horseface came stumbling in and told me, and I dashed over for a look. I'd heard the shooting, but the wind was making such a racket that the shots just didn't mean anything."

Gillis said, "Yeah. We heard 'em; we didn't pay no attention, either. How'd it happen, Horseface?"

Inside the bearcage jail, Maloney stood leaning against the bars, peering out, gaping and—for once—speechless.

Taylor at last found his voice. "Hank come in drunk and sort of quarrelsome, Deputy. One word led to another—this damned wind—jumpy nerves, maybe. Hank grabbed the axe and I grabbed my gun. He came for me and I started shooting—kept pulling the trigger until he fell down."

"How many shots did you fire?"

"I—I don't know, Deputy. I kept shooting until he fell down."

Gillis turned to Kinkaid. "How many shots you hear, George?"

"I didn't count 'em."

Gillis slapped Horseface Taylor's shoulder reassuringly. "Don't take it so hard, Horseface. I'm sorry as hell." Ordinarily, he knew, Taylor was the mildest of men. "I've got to lock you up, of course, but I wouldn't worry if I were you; it looks like an open and shut case of self-defence."

Taylor only went on mumbling, "I killed Hank. He was my best friend and I killed him. I killed Hank—"

Gillis fished the keys from his pocket and walked toward the jail door, Horseface Taylor following him submissively. As Gillis inserted the key and turned it in the lock, he inclined his head at Link Maloney. "Guess I've got to shoo you out of there, Link."

The barred door squealed open, and Maloney slipped out of the cage into the room. Without being urged, Horseface lowered his head and lurched inside, and dropped accordion-like on the bunk, where he sat holding his long jaw in his hands, staring at nothing.

For a moment, Gillis, Maloney and Kinkaid, all stood watching the stricken Horseface.

Then Gillis said savagely, "I might have expected trouble on a night like this."

Maloney plucked at his shirt sleeve.

"I don't believe he ever done any such thing, Deputy. I just can't believe he done it."

Startled, Gillis wheeled to face Maloney. "You feel all right, Link? Horseface confessed! Remember? And Kinkaid backs him up."

"I don't care what Horseface said. Somethin' is wrong somewhere. There ain't a finer, kinder feller nowhere than Horseface Taylor. I reckon I ought to know, Deputy!"

FOR AN instant, Gillis didn't reply. He was thinking, and he knew that Maloney was thinking, of the countless little acts of kindness and selfless friendliness Horseface was always performing for someone, and never counting the cost. Horseface Taylor couldn't see a fellow man in any kind of distress without immediately wanting to do whatever he could to help; whether it inconvenienced himself was no moment. Neither Gillis nor Maloney could count the times Horseface Taylor had come promptly to bail Maloney out of jail when Maloney'd been jugged—as now—for being drunk and disorderly. Horseface would say it was just silly—Link's whoopin' and hollerin' didn't bother nobody—and plank down bail money.

Remembering all of which, Gillis said quietly to Maloney, "I reckon a man would likely shoot his own mother if she came at him with an axe, Link! Reckon anyone would have done the same as Horseface."

Maloney blinked, and looked relieved. "Guess you're right, at that. Just the same, I got a hunch things ain't on the square. Hank was a good fella, too, except—"

"Except when he was drunk. When Hank Grommet got his nose wet, he wanted to massacre everybody in sight." Gillis turned to Kinkaid. "Anyone else come out, when Horseface come over to your shack, George?"

Kinkaid shook his head. "Didn't see anyone, Deputy. My cabin is the closest to theirs, and Horseface had to roust me out. If the shooting didn't arouse me, Bill, I don't imagine it would have disturbed anyone else."

Gillis said pointedly, "That satisfy you, Link?" Then, to Kinkaid, "Come along with me, George. I'd better take a gander at the scene. Maybe you can fill in the gaps. I don't reckon there's any use to call the coroner; Doc Brindle would be drunk this late in the day."

They moved toward the door, and Maloney started to follow. Gillis waved him back. "You stay here, Link. I had to let you out to make room for Horseface, but your time ain't up till tomorrow mornin'."

●

DEPUTY-SHERIFF William A. Gillis returned to his office some time later hatless, hair full of sand, and in a vile temper. At the moment he re-entered the building, his eyes blazed at Link Maloney, who had taken advantage of the Deputy's absence to appropriate the desk chair.

"Get the hell out of that chair!" Gillis bellowed.

Maloney jumped, and eased across the room to hunker back to the wall, watching in discreet silence as Gillis began to curse under his breath and pace the floor.

Grinning crookedly, Maloney watched the deputy's performance for perhaps ten minutes, not failing to observe the scorching sidelong glances Gillis was casting at the tall skinny man hunched deep in dejection on the jail bunk.

When at last Gillis halted the sulphurous flow of words in order to catch a breath of fresh air, Link Maloney drawled laconically, "Trouble with you, Deputy, is that you been readin' the rule book lately. A one-eyed jackass could see it's poor old Horseface you're wantin' to cuss at."

Gillis hauled up short and favored Maloney with a guilty stare. Then, without making any retort at Link, he

strode up to the barred cage. "Horseface!"

Taylor lifted his long face, his expression vacuous and uncomprehending. "Huh?"

"Don't put on an act, Horseface," Gillis snarled. "Or, if you're bound to put on an act, it had better be damned good."

A slight glimmering of intelligence came to Taylor's long-jowled visage, then fled. He dropped his head back into his hands and sank again into his stunned abstraction.

"You killed Hank Grommett," Gillis fired at him, "but it wasn't in self-defense! You murdered him—shot him down without giving him a Chinaman's chance, killed him in cold blood."

Taylor gave no indication of hearing the harsh accusation.

Gillis gave up trying to badger Taylor into making some revealing and condemning response, returned to his desk and continued his seething monologue.

After allowing time for the edge to wear off Gillis' wrath, Maloney sidled up to the desk. "Somethin' was wrong over to the shack, Deputy! What?"

Gillis glared. "You got ears. You heard what I told that long-drawn drink of water in the bearcage."

"Sure. Sure!" Maloney agreed placatingly. "You said it was murder 'stead of self-defense. How'd you figure it?"

"Horseface said Hank came at him with an axe. There wasn't any axe."

Maloney started and blinked. "The hell you say! But maybe Horseface picked up the axe afterward and carried it outside without thinkin'—a man'll do things like that sometimes. Maybe he dropped it somewhere in the sand."

GILLIS shook his head. "I thought of that, too, but there was more to it than just the axe. The slug that killed Hank Grommett was fired by someone standing above him while he lay on the floor. Hank was shot twice; once along the cheekbone, enough to floor him. But the fatal bullet entered just above his temple, drilled clean through his head and through the floor under his head. No judge or jury in the country could make anything but hanging evidence out of that."

Maloney clucked his tongue dolorously. "You got old Horseface cold turkey, 'pears like. What about the gun?"

"A thirty-eight Smith and Wesson on the floor by his body, all shots fired—if it's any of your business."

Maloney's thin shoulders dropped in defeat, and he turned away. Then he whirled and demanded, "Granted Horseface must of did it, what do you reckon was the reason?"

"Why, hell, how should I know? I don't know, and I don't give a hoot; why does any man beef his own partner?"

"Could be they dug into a vein of rich gold ore," Maloney speculated. "Then again, I don't reckon they'd be likely to in that prairie-dog hole they been workin'. You ain't been around Black Rock too long, Deputy. You wouldn't be knowin' that Horseface Taylor and Hank Grommett wasn't even honest-to-Pete prospectors, now, would you, Deputy?"

"The hell you say? I supposed they dug just for fun."

"Why, sure. That's exactly what they done, since you put it thataway. Notice anythin' peculiar about their shack?"

"Nothing. Unless you mean that the joint was bogged down with boxes, cases and crates of rock, all labeled and catalogued."

"Them was specimens. Horseface was a teacher in some college once, until he become plumb loco over rocks. Sort of a rock-hound, you might call him; so was Hank Grommett." He turned and shouted, "Ain't that right, Horseface?"

Horseface either did not hear, or didn't care.

"Well, anyhow," Link insisted ear-

nestly, "they throwed in together because they both was loco about rocks. Maybe you didn't know it, Deputy, but they wasn't even diggin' for gold."

Gillis stared at Maloney, dumbfounded. "Then how in the Sam Hill did they earn their beans?"

"Oh, their claim is along a fault line in the volcanic formation. They's pockets of clay all along the fault where Horseface and Hank took out a few stones, amethyst, tourmaline, kunzite, garnet and opals, and now and then maybe a little bitty emerald. None of the stuff was worth much, but there was enough variety to keep both of 'em happy as a pair of chipmunks."

Gillis looked suddenly interested. "Maybe they ran into some big emeralds! Emeralds are worth plenty."

Link shook his head. "They's lots of little emeralds all through this country, as big as a pinhead maybe. None worth diggin' for. Hank and Horseface got a few along with the other stuff, is all. All told, the emeralds cashed in for hardly enough to buy sowbelly and yeller corn meal. I been in their diggin's, Deputy. Nobody ain't *ever* goin' to find no gold."

Gillis snorted. "So Horseface didn't beef Hank over no crown jewels! Maybe he just got tired of seein' him around. I still don't give a hoot. Now button your chin, before I toss you back in the can with that high-pocket Judas!"

"Sure, sure!" Maloney agreed hastily. "Only, will you give me twelve hours from tomorry mornin' to play out a hunch?"

Desperately, Bill Gillis agreed.

"And will you sort of hold off the coroner's inquest? Doc Brindle ain't never sober till about noon, nohow."

Gillis acquiesced to that too, wearily. "Okay. Okay! And now for Gawd's sake shut up and let me think!"

3

THE CLUSTER of shacks huddled against canyon walls for a distance of a furlong in the flat gulch floor, a dead-set to intercept one of those flash floods that sometimes occurred in the region, and which would inevitably occur some day in this one.

Nobody worried; nobody cared.

Link Maloney hustled along the wagon track which threaded the canyon, with the morning sun and the wind at his back, passed the *Nugget* saloon with no more than a regretful thought for his regular morning pick-me-up, and followed the wagon truck until it petered out in a refuse dump.

Five shacks, obviously fabricated from flattened tin cans and cast-off packing crates salvaged from the refuse pile, humped in haphazard confusion just beyond the little expanse of broken bottles and rusted tin containers.

Other than the hovel in which Hank Grommett's body awaited one of Doc Brindle's more sober moments, the shanties were the property, respectively, of George Kinkaid, Elmo Grogan, Snuffy Jones, and the two Beasley brothers, Web and Harry.

Maloney passed up the first two shacks and stopped at the third. The door was padlocked, and Link stood for a second contemplating the lock and tugging at his chin whiskers. "Likely," he mused, "Bill Gillis left the key with George Kinkaid." He glanced at the next shack beyond, Kinkaid's, and just beyond that the hovel occupied by Harry and Web Beasley. "And again—maybe I'll just let George sleep," he mumbled.

He went around to the rear, only to find that the back door was latched from the inside. The only window also was latched, but Link opened it with the blade of his Barlow knife, and eased into the room.

Hank Grommett lay on the floor covered by a blanket. Maloney lifted the blanket and squatted on his heels to inspect the corpse. "Hmmm," he murmured. "Hit twice, just like the man said."

The superficial wound along Grommett's cheekbone was the uglier of

the two. Blood had oozed from it to congeal in a dark pool on the floor. The lethal one had been neat, bloodless, efficient and final. The slug had entered above the eybrow and had left only a red spot and an inconspicuous blue-gray weal to mark its entry.

Link moved the head. The slug had blasted a somewhat larger hole through the floor, undoubtedly from having telescoped against Hank Grommett's tough skull.

Maloney chuckled grimly. "Reckon Bill Gillis can read sign, all right, even if he don't have no nose for stray skunk. That slug above the eye had to be the one that killed Hank, unless someone picked him up after he was dead and shot him in the whiskers just for the hell of it. Reckon she couldn't of been thataway neither, or there wouldn't of been no blood."

And there was blood. Plenty of blood. Too much blood?

LINK EXAMINED the jaw wound again, and racked his brains for some clue as to just how much such a wound would bleed. He ransacked his memory of the dozens of bar-room brawls and forty varieties of mayhem. He could recall no single wound like Grommett's that had bled so freely.

Then, a considerable interval of time must have passed, from the time that slug to the cheek floored Hank, to the firing of the lethal bullet through Hank Grommett's brain. One thing was certain. That last one would have stopped Hank's clock almost instantaneously; there would have been no more time for Hank's heart to pump blood through the gash in the cheek. There was no possible doubt of which bullet had killed Hank Grommett.

Maloney covered the dead man's face and got to his feet. For a moment he stood thoughtfully tugging at his scraggly beard. "Of course," he ruminated, "Horseface *could* of sat around twiddlin' his ninny and waitin' for Hank to come out of it, then after Hank had spilled a bucket of blood, decided to put the kibosh on Hank good and proper. Leastwise, a judge or jury might figure thataway, not knowin' old Horseface. Horseface just plumb ain't that kind of a sidewinder."

He cudgelled his brains over the puzzle, and reluctantly gave it up and headed for the window to make his exit.

He had one leg out the window when he recalled the gun, and slithered back into the room and walked to where the gun still lay on the floor. As Gillis had said, the gun contained six empty shells.

In all probability, Maloney speculated, the thirty eight still lay exactly where Gillis had found it, for though Bill Gillis was as contrary as a muley cow, he was also a stickler for precise detail.

Link stood over the gun and faced Hank Grommett's body. He chuckled wryly. Win, lose or draw, one fact was dead certain—Horseface Taylor was one of the world's worst marksmen. One slug had blasted into the floor six feet to the right of Hank's body, and had caromed into a wooden box of ore specimens. Another had hit the well, high and wide, and a third had shattered the leg of a bunk. Two more holes in a sheet of corrugated tin to the left of the door accounted for five, and another, presumably from the slug that had ricocheted off Hank's cheekbone, was blasted through the door at about head height.

Six bullet holes, and the one through the floor beneath Hank's head made seven. Seven shots, and the seventh must have been fired some few minutes after the one that made the jaw wound on Hank's cheekbone.

Maloney began to hum a tuneless tune. For a moment he considered the idea of carrying the news to Bill Gillis, then he discarded the thought.

"Danged if I do," he muttered.

"Bill Gillis is bad enough confused already."

He skinned back out of the window and circled the house again to see if he might have missed something. He made his second discovery just outside the back door.

A handle, spanking new and gleaming white, protruded from beneath a haphazard heap of mesquite roots that had been dug for fire wood. The missing axe! Maloney pulled it free and inspected it. What would an axe with a brand new handle be doing under a heap of firewood? He hid the axe under the house and went next door.

HE FOUND George Kinkaid cursing a hangover with a pot of inky coffee. Kinkaid invited Maloney to share a cup, but Link demurred.

"Can't stay, George. Just dropped in to see if I might borry a candle. I got an idee Hank was croaked on account of somethin' they run across in their diggin's; the deputy wanted me to kinda look things over."

Kinkaid's interest flared. "You don't say! So those old coots stumbled onto pay dirt! Horseface say something last night?"

"He shore did," Maloney lied. "Told a good story, too. He's got Bill Gillis more'n half convinced. You didn't see nobody else around, when Horseface rousted you out last night, did you, George?"

"Nope. Not a soul. But the night was black as the inside of a cow, and the wind was making such a hell of a racket I couldn't have heard anyone anyhow. There might have been a regiment around, for all of me, Link."

"There's somethin' else Bill Gillis is curious about, George. You recollect seein' two bullet holes in Hank's carcass when you first run over to look at him?"

Kinkaid shook his head. "Can't say that I noticed. Horseface kept hollering that he'd killed Hank, and I took him at his word. Hank was lying there limp as cheesecloth with his head all bloody. He looked dead enough to me."

"That so? Well, maybe I better take that candle and rattle my hocks over to the diggin's."

Kinkaid got a new miner's candle from the shelf of a makeshift grub box, and handed it to the bearded little man. Maloney thanked him, made as if to leave, then turned back.

"Another thing, George—I like to forgot!" he lied again, easily. "Bill Gillis is cookin' up a little surprise party. Figures maybe he can smoke out a drygulcher. He told me to ask you to rig a little poker game for Elmo Grogan, Snuffy Jones and the Beasley boys, tonight at *The Nugget*. Around eight o'clock, say."

Kinkaid looked annoyed. "That might be a little tough. Grogan and I aren't very friendly, and the Beasley boys don't play often."

"Might look fishy if one of you was to hold back," Link insinuated. "I tell you what; just put a bug in Snuffy Jones' ear. He can pass the word along."

Within the next ten minutes Maloney called on Elmo Grogan and Snuffy Jones. To each of them he told a variation of the yarn he had fed to George Kinkaid: that Horseface Taylor had done enough talking to convince Bill Gillis that Hank Grommett had been killed by some unknown third person, as part of a plan to take over the partners' mine after Horseface had been hanged for Hank's murder.

And he, Link, he intimated, was now going to discover just what the mine could contain to motivate such double-dyed skullduggery.

At the third shanty he drew a blank. The Beasley brothers both worked in the Lodestar mine and had been gone since six that morning. After leaving the Beasley shack, Maloney made one more call, to the Black Rock Mercantile Company, to ask Matt Bailey how recently either of the partners had purchased a new axe handle.

Then Link had breakfast at the Oasis Cafe and spent the rest of the day acting mysterious and dropping oblique hints about the killing wherever he figured such hints would do the most good, mainly in the *Nugget*.

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AN ACUTE observer might have taken cognizance of two anomalous quirks in Link Maloney's behavior. For once he remained cold sober; and not once did he stray from the *Nugget's* big east window, which commanded an excellent panorama of the gulch and every mine and prospect hole in it. Abruptly at five that afternoon, Maloney ducked out of the saloon and headed up the canyon.

Grommett and Taylor's gem mine was clear at the end of the gulch, its entrance tunnel little more than a glorified badger hole in the cliff. Once Link had reached it, he lighted his candle, fixed the candlestick on his hat, and went in.

He followed the main tunnel for about a hundred feet, examining closely every square inch of formation overhead, on both sides and underfoot. There were faint traces of copper, lead and zinc, none worth a second look. Of silver or gold there was no sign whatever.

After Maloney had exhausted the possibilities of the main tunnel, he set to work on the two drifts. The first was no more than twenty feet long and terminated in a blank wall of basalt. The other drift slanted downward at about a ten degree grade. Maloney gave that one the same meticulous scrutiny, until he began to slosh in water up to his ankles.

Then he gave the drift a second look! There was no sign of recent working. A few odds and ends of scrap lumber floated in the water. There was nothing else; evidently the flooded drift had been abandoned for some time!

Maloney began to chuckle as he splashed toward the main tunnel, and by the time the tunnel mouth was visible his chuckle had grown into a belly laugh. He had brought his mirth under control by the time he emerged from the tunnel and left the mine behind.

He stopped once in the shade of the trees, hunted about for a twig about the size of his forefinger, sat down and whittled the stick to a point. Then he took off his hat, and surveyed the tattered old felt with a dry grin. "Reckon two more won't make no difference," he muttered. "I wonder what a bullet-hole through a hat really looks like?"

With the sharp stick, he poked a couple of holes in his old felt hat, fore and aft. Then he threw the sharpened stick away, and made straight for Bill Gillis' office.

Gillis greeted him with a notable lack of enthusiasm, until Link showed off his punctured hat. "What's that look like, Deputy?"

"Looks like you poked holes in the crown."

Maloney looked hurt. "Poked 'em, hell! Ain't you never seen a bullet-track in a hat?"

"A bullet-hole!"

"Why, shore! I was pokin' around Horseface and Harry's diggin's, and some dang buzzard took a shot at me."

Gillis leaned back in his chair and stared. "The hell you say!"

"Yeah. Looks like there's somethin' up there worth killin' for, after all, Deputy.

Gillis said slowly, "Looks like you got somethin' there. If somebody was interested in that hole in the ground, enough to take a pot-shot at you, he might have been interested enough to have given Hank that hole in the head."

"That's what I figured from the beginnin'. There's somethin' else, too. You listen at me close now, Deputy; I got a little scheme cooked up to smoke us out a varmint."

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5

THE WIND was blasting down the gulch with a ferocious whoosh when Linked dropped into the *Nugget* at around seven o'clock that evening. The saloon consisted of one big boxlike room, with a few card tables scattered about the bare pine floor, and a scrubbed plank thrown across two beer barrels serving as the bar at one end of the room.

The Beasley brothers had not yet arrived, but George Kinkaid, looking vaguely discomfitted, was dealing stud to Elmo Grogan and Snuffy Jones at a table near the saloon's single huge window. Grogan was a barrel-bodied man with a fringe of red hair about his bald pate, while Snuffy Jones—except for a long drooping snout—might have been a close relative of Link Maloney himself. Snuffy was thin, hard and weather-beaten, and his scraggly beard and pepper-and-salt thatch might have been taken from the same piece of goods as Link's own.

Snuffy, a notorious tightwad, looked up suspiciously as Maloney approached the table. "Got any money, Link?"

"Enough for a hand or two. Mind if I sit in?"

Snuffy said grudgingly, "You can sit in, but I don't aim to pay for none of your drinks."

"Suits me," Link agreed affably. "She just happens I'm on the wagon anyhow, this evenin'."

They played lackadaisically until the deal had passed around the table, Link winning a six-bit pot with kings back to back, and losing the next when Elmo Grogan called his bluff in a high thin voice oddly at variance with the man's bulk. Playing his usual conservative game, George Kinkaid was a couple of dollars to the good when the Beasley boys arrived.

Brothers couldn't have looked less alike. Web was about thirty, neat, trim and well-scrubbed; Harry was six inches taller, a loutish shambling giant with a gross slack-featured face. Harry looked ten years the older, yet was in reality two years the younger. When they spoke, primary impressions were abruptly reversed. Words flowed from Harry's slack lips as smooth and soothing as honey, while Web's voice was harsh, his words acid and sharp.

Without preliminary, Web walked up to the table, planted his feet wide apart, and demanded suspiciously; "What kind of fish is cookin' here, anyhow? Nobody's ever gone out of the way to be sociable to me'n and Harry before."

"Why, nothin's goin' on," Grogan disclaimed in his incogruous squeak. "Just a neighborly game, that's all."

Web refused to be mollified. "I don't like it. For two years nobody has ever asked Harry and me anywhere, and tonight when we come home from work there's Snuffy waitin' to invite us to a little game. Even hinted it'd look bad if we turned him down. It don't look right, what with Hank Grommett bein' croaked just yesterday."

It remained for Harry's soothing-syrup voice to placate Web. "Sit down, Web boy; we mustn't allow our friends to think we're ungrateful for their hospitality."

Still grumbling, Web pulled out a chair. Elmo Grogan picked up the deck and resumed dealing. Link Maloney shoved back his chair and deserted the table. While the game went on without him, Maloney strolled to the bar and bought a pitcher of water with his last twobits. He brought the pitcher and a drinking tumbler back to the table and filled his glass.

"Anyone care for a glass of water?" he asked. "No? It's right good stuff, once you get the hang of it."

Kinkaid looked up with frank surprise, and Harry Beasley watched in slack-mouthed fascination that could easily have been mistaken for idiocy. None of the others paid the slightest attention.

"Yep," Link continued, "water is funny stuff. After killin' that tinhorn cardsharp for his poke about this time last year, and then killin' his brother Larry over the split, Marvin Bass would of gave the whole shebang for enough water to wet his tongue, and him not a mile from Fortymile Wells."

THERE WAS, outside, a sudden lull in the wind. The air pressed in, hot and heavy. The other five men at the table looked up and stared at Link Maloney. The hush continued, doubly intense for the cessation of the wind.

Ever truculent Web Beasley demanded, "What you drivin' at?"

Harry's mellifluous tones reproached, "Don't be rude, Web. Link is only makin' friendly conversation." He said to Link, in reference to what Link had just said, "The oldest tragedy. Cain and Abel."

"Just the same, I don't like it!" Web growled. "Hank Grommett killed last night, and now this monkey-business."

Harry said, "Hush, Web!" Then, to no one in particular, "Too bad about Hank Grommett; him and Horseface was as close as partners can be."

Then the wind struck again, with an enormous cuffing roar that set the building to trembling like a frightened animal. Snuffy Jones began to talk, without making himself heard over the racket of the storm. It came in giant gusts, as if some leviathan were blowing out a stubborn candle, rising to a roar, then subsiding to a murmur.

There came again one of those lulls, a dead hush, settling over the room. In the midst of it, there came an incredible and electrifying sound, the shattering of glass. The big window seemed to fly to pieces in every direction, as an elongated heavy object hurled into the room, crashed to the floor, flip-flopped and slithered to a stop on the worn boards.

The six men at the poker table jerked to their feet like so many marionettes, and stood frozen, staring.

Link Maloney scuttled across the saloon, picked up the heavy missile and hefted it in his hands. "Well, I'll be danged!" he breathed. "The axe that Hank tried to kill Horseface with!"

"No it ain't," Elmo Grogan said flatly.

The wind rose again, in fiendish fury, rousing a cloud of dust inside the saloon with the blast through the broken window. Pebbles began to clatter against wall and roof, but Grogan's high thin voice cut through the racket like a blade through butter.

"That ain't it; Hank's axe's got a brand new handle."

Then, too late, Grogan caught the impact of his words. Wildly he glared at the men at the table, then reached under his shirt.

Snuffy Jones stood wired to the spot. Web Beasley lowered his head and started to charge, only to be grabbed by Harry Beasley and thrown to the floor.

Link wheeled to run for the barkeep's gun, and only George Kinkaid matched Grogan's draw. But Kinkaid never had a chance to fire.

Through the shattered window, twin blasts of buckshot and acrid smoke roared. The double charge took Grogan squarely in the forehead, and carried half his bald head away.

Deputy-sheriff Bill Gillis stepped through the vacant window, into the hushed and stunned presence of the men.

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WITHIN thirty minutes, Horseface Taylor had been surrendered to the good-hearted solicitude of George Kinkaid and the Beasley brothers.

Inside the deputy's office, Gillis relaxed his decorum sufficiently to break the seal on a bottle of bonded whiskey.

"Damn you, Link," he said belligerently as he poured whiskey, "you bamboozled me into that. Now you open up and explain yourself. Tell it from the beginning, and don't cut corners."

Maloney told a straight story, fibbing enough only to prevent Gillis from feeling foolish.

"But that damned axe!" Gillis fumed, when Maloney had finished. "I still don't get it. That axe you had me heave through the window wasn't the axe Hank Grommett tried to chop Horseface with; that was your old axe!"

"Yeah," Link conceded. "It had to be that way, else Grogan would of been on guard. You see, Horseface Taylor bought that new axe handle late yesterday. Nobody'd of been likely to know about it, but the bird who dropped in after Horseface stunned Hank. Grogan saw his chance, put a slug through Hank's head, then hid the axe in the wood pile to knock the props out from under Horseface's plea of self-defense."

"Oh, that's all clear enough," Gillis protested, "but why substitute your old axe for the real one?"

"Grogan's pretty oily, Deputy. We had to sneak up on his blind side, catch him with his guard down. Trap him into admittin' he *knew* about the new axe handle!"

"But what was it all about? What'd Grogan want of Hank's and Horseface's mine?"

"Hell, Bill. Where'd you get your drinkin' water?"

"It's hauled in, of course."

"How much does it cost?"

"Ten cents a glass."

"Well, that's it. Not no gold, nor silver, nor emeralds, nor nothin' like that. But water. Pure, sweet spring water; the only fresh water this side of Fortymile!"

Bill Gillis gaped. "What the hell are you talkin' about?"

"I told ye, Deputy! Water! There in the rat hole Horseface and Hank called a mine. They was so danged wrapped up into their rock huntin', they never thought of what it could mean. But Grogan seen it! Men can sell it for half of what we have to pay for it from Fortymile, and make a fortune. So Grogan figured to kill Hank, let Horseface get strung up for it, and cop that there spring in the mine and make some real money."

"Damn it, I busted that big window, to please you, too."

Maloney hooted. "Please me! Hell, you got yourself a killer, didn't you? Horseface can buy sixty windows like that, and frame 'em in rubies, once he gets peddlin' that pure sweet water of his'n."

"Yeah. And what about them holes in your hat?"

Link grinned smugly. "I told you. Grogan seen me pokin' round the mine and took a pot-shot at me. Gimme another drink, Deputy."

A Powerful Novel of Midnight Mystery

WAVE LENGTH: DEATH

By Daniel R. Gilgannon

leads off the current issue of

FAMOUS DETECTIVE STORIES

Bertha's wearing skin-colored tights, and the act is a rip-roarin' success.

THE LADY AND THE LION

By REX WHITE CHURCH

When Bertha Kerman, the Lion Queen, came to Deadman, the feud between Francis Kirby and Diamond Jack Sinco busted sky-high!

I TELL YOU, there ain't nothin' purtier than sunset out upon that pinon-clad mesa in th' Toquimas. There was grazin' for th' prospectors an' their mules—yes, suh, I've actual-

ly heard of sourdoughs gettin' so hungry they tied their mules away from th' grass so they could eat it themselves, and some of them afterwards come out with gunnysacks full of th' yellow stuff that made old men young and young wimmin wish them men was older—not meanin' they was greedy, them wimmin. But speakin' of th' sunset an' th' Toquimas reminds me of th' old opery house that stood in th' heart of th' town called Deadman an' th' Lady an' th' Lion.

I reckon you ain't never heard of how some awful purty wimmin come out here when gold fever burned men alive an' run their temperatures up to a hundred an' ten, with only one thing doin' them any good an' that was more gold. We-ll, didn't all them wimmin of th' stage miss Deadman, an' one of th' best-lookin' ones pulled into th' placer camp one day to perform her act in th' opery house.

Poor ol' Deadman! She ain't got nothin' to hold her alive when th' pay gravel in th' Gulch pinches out, an' when th' final bucketful is h'isted an' washed, there ain't no reason for nobody to linger on; so th' town folds up, an' before long all th' windows of th' Grand Opery House fall in an' th' roof sags in th' middle like a broken down burro with a spinal curvature. But I'm tellin' you while she's goin' full blast she ain't nothin' for th' inhabitants of th' community to be ashamed of. Reckon one of th' greatest shows ever performed there was th' lion tamer's act which featured this here bootiful woman who billed herself as Bertha Kerman, Th' Lion Queen of "Th' Lady and Th' Lion."

Th' hotel was named th' George Washington House an' it had sixty rooms, all fixed up nice, with good beds an' good meals in th' dinin' room downstairs. It's hotter'n fire an' wild hosses are coolin' off in Big Smoky Valley th' day Bertha comes in on th' stagecoach, with a big lion in a steel cage ridin' on th' roof of th' hack. He's growlin' something fierce an' everybody comes runnin' down th' board sidewalks and yellin' to one another, an' th' opery house has its doors open wide an' a banner in garish letters says, *THE MOST REMARKABLE FEATS EVER PRESENTED IN ANY THEATRE IN THE WORLD WILL BE PERFORMED HERE TONIGHT.*

They stand around, them sourdoughs and gamblers an' Injuns an' the Injun dogs an' th' excitement is so high they jist ain't no let up to it.

The dandified young woman stands on th' iron step of th' concord an' peers with a big sweet smile full upon them dusty face miners an' nondescript loiterers. Yes, sir, they sure are feedin' their bustin' orbs upon th' purtiest sight they have ever seen an' some of them can't believe it.

Deadman ain't much to brag about at first glance. Jist a long wide street smoky with yellow dust and colorless buildings that ain't never seen a paint brush and rough plank sidewalks with slivers in them which make some of th' sourdoughs keep their boots on; an' here is th' great actress an' her lion peerin' up and down, over an' under an' takin' full stock of th' town where she is to make a week's stand. Of course it ain't hard to tell that this gal in silks and satins and with her big picture hat shadin' the smartest eyes that has ever gazed out on Deadman's business district, ain't very deep impressed. But she shrugs them shapely shoulders an' her smile deepens an' she waves at th' crowd. They cheer her like she is th' First Lady Of The Land or something of th' kind. An' there's Diamond Jack Sinco takin' it all in; he's th' unestimable owner of th' *Four Kings* saloon.

DOC ANDERSON used to say about Jack Sinco— "He was a little fellow with baby-blue eyes that could get as cold as stars in Alasky; he had curly black hair an' a small, pouty mouth, an' there never was a

speck of nothin' ever got on his clothes, winter or summer, day or night; he wore white gloves an' white shirts an' a pink-polky-dotted ribbin tie. Th' only time he would remove them white gloves was when he was eatin' an' sleepin'."

Doc was th' local dentist—th' only tooth-puller Deadman had, an' he was a philosopher along with it. He used to say: "It takes a lot of happenings to make a life," an' I reckon, come to think of it, Doc was right. He could officiate in sickness, too, an' give out two barrels of them black, sugar-coated pills when he was operatin' his office.

Wa-ll, there's another man that witnesses th' rare an' onusual sight, also, an' he's jist as big a gambler an' jist as rich as th' owner of th' *Four Kings*. He's bigger in size, too; he's a yaller-headed, grayeyed son of a millionaire mine owner, an' his name is Francis Kirby. Kirby's standin' right in front of th' express office where th' stage lets Bertha out, an' where her roarin' African lion is unloaded. In fact, smooth faced an' immaculate Kirby, with his high cheek bones an' his bronze complexion, holds her arm to help her down outen th' hack.

It seems in that fast fleetin' minute their eyes connect and what they see in each other is enough to make both turn a mite pinkish an' then they look glad at each other, an' say somethin' which sounds confused an' don't express what they mean at all.

Wa-ll, they get Nero, th' lion, unloaded an' Bertha goes to th' hotel. Francis walks across th' street an' Jack Sinco says, "Does she look as good close up as she does this far away?"

"She looks better," Kirby tells him. "But I'm claimin' her because luck played my hand for me. I was right there when the door opened an' she literally stepped down into my arms."

"Did you tell her your name?" Sinco inquires casually; "an' did you find out hers?"

Kirby nods. "Bertha Kerman. "She's a lion-tamer, an' I fancy she can tame men, too. If you want to find out more—"

"I surely do," says Sinco. "Come on in an' I'll buy you a drink."

They step inside, an' indulge in a drink, and finally Kirby gets into a poker game with Sinco, eventually droppin' twenty-five hundred dollars. They're both pretty slick at cards, bein' gamblin' is their meal ticket.

These men ain't friends. They're like a tiger an' a lion an' I don't know which is th' tiger an' which is th' other. They've been gunnin' for each other a long time, jist becuz they happen to be th' most influential an' th' richest pair in Deadman. One or th' other of them is goin' to get it. Doc Anderson is puttin' his money on Francis Kirby, howsomeever, becuz Doc figgers he's the cleanest an' th' best brain of th' duet, an' th' biggest hearted.

But there are them that figger th' opposite way, so it's kind of a tense minute when that shadder of a woman looms up in th' picture. Take two men like them, with each dopin' it out that if it isn't for th' other, he'll be th' kingpin an' can rule th' situation. I don't mean Francis Kirby is figgerin' like that. Doc claims he ain't. But I know very well that little smart-eyed Sinco is gettin' ready to pounce.

There's a big renegade name of Hampton Lock an' he owes Diamond Jack a whiskey bill an', though it ain't known by any outsiders at th' time, Sinco says to Lock, "You give that Kirby a lickin' he won't forget an' you won't be owin' me nothin' but your good will. Besides, if you do an extra good job of it I'll slip you a hundred dollars to boot."

Wa-ll, now we're a gettin' someplace. Kirby is makin' fine headway with Bertha Kerman, an' Nero, th' lion, ain't unfriendly when Kirby goes back stage, furtherin' his acquaintance with th' gal who has made him dizzy. Th' show goes off

with a big bang, and Diamond Jack Sinco is right there in th' audience; the gal makes Nero jump through a hoop of fire an' in skin-tight flesh colored trunks which makes her look like she ain't got no clothes on a-tall, she rides Nero an' coaxes him into buckin' after th' fashion of an uncultured mustang.

CLYDE DARROW—he's th' town town marshal—tall an' handsome an' jist about as clean as Kirby or Sinco in his personal appearance, appoints himself to be th' lion's bodyguard. There's always a bunch of mischievious fellows around a gold minin' camp; an' when Darrow's sittin' backstage an' keepin' an eye on Nero, he's talkin' right fancy to Bertha an' she's listenin' jist as fancy.

And so wa-ll, Sinco don't make no headway though becuz he's not th' one she's interested in. He sends th' lion woman some of his finest imported champagne an' a ten-dollar box of New York bon-bons. He scribbles a little note an' tells her how he'll be mighty tickled if she'll come over to his establishment an' have a visit, bein' th' *Four Kings* is th' most fastidious an' sumptuous of its kind in th' world, not barrin' Monte Carlo.

She don't answer, but her an' Clyde Darrow drink th' champagne. When Kirby comes to see her, she says, "You know something, Francis—if I were to go over there an' sing th' boys a song, it would surely boost my business at th' opery house."

Kirby is reluctant to say yes. He jist sits quiet, an' finally he asks her if she would like to do it, an' when she reaffirms her notion by noddin' her blonde head up and down, Kirby says, "All right, I'll go over there with you."

Of course gamblin' an' drinkin' an' carousin' is th' main amusements in Deadman, an' it ain't nothin' to see Injun an' Mexican gals doin' dances on a high platform while some musician pounds th' tom-toms. One of these numbers is a-goin' on when Kirby conducts Bertha into th' elaborate honky-tonk; Bertha don't even blush.

The Mexican dancer is gyratin' an' distortin' her slim carcass an' th' tom-toms are soundin' in their weird rhythm, an' them that are close to th' platform can see th' globules of sweat that stand out on th' pretty thing that's doin' th' cooch, an' they can even smell that sweat. But they don't mind. They're enjoyin' it to th' fullest an' praisin' Diamond Jack for givin' them somethin' extraordinary like that.

This here dancin' girl's name is Carlotta an' she's lived a clean life out in th' sun an' under th' stars an' she's never confined herself to no hovel, like a lot of them that do such dances; it strikes Doc Anderson that th' dancer is jist one in a million that's bound to make a name for herself travelin' an' doin' her performance. He don't see nothin' particular wrong in th' act except he thinks she ought have on a stitch or two of clothes to drape her riggin' in certain places. The Old Mexico sun has burned her body till it's awful dark.

But there she is, a doin' th' dance of th' seven veils or somethin' which ain't nothin' more nor less than th' old time Cooch, an' th' room harmonizes; there's garish murals in it of Roman queens taking baths an' Salome dancin' before Herod, an' that there woman they called Goldiva ridin' her horse, all in them bright, gaudy colors which cost Diamond Jack a lot of money to get done by a painter from New York. Th' smoke is thick enough to cut it with a knife an' glasses are rattling an' men are laugnin' an' cheering Carlotta whose perfect form is expressin' every emotion a woman is capable of showin' under th' circumstances, an' there is Bertha Kerman, lookin' on. She's crowded her way closer, an' she's grippin' Francis Kirby's arm; to her it's art, and she ain't slow in exclaiming in appreciation, "She's got every-

thing and ought to be showin' over there at th' opery house."

But Kirby says she ain't an opery house dancer and Carlotta's stomping bare feet pound out a tattoo an' th' tom-toms pound louder. Then Bertha speaks.

Kirby is surprised to hear her say, "I got a nice body, too; but I don't go around showin' it like that girl. Her skin's too brown to show off right well." Mebbe she's a little jealous.

Kirby can't help but be embarrassed. He finds Sinco an' introduces Bertha; th' whole crowd in th' saloon have stopped watchin' th' dancin' woman an' have got their eyes shinin' like lamps on th' new girl with th' hip-length yaller hair.

Wa-ll, while Sinco is doin' his best to interest th' lion woman in his personal charms, th' bully Lock finds his chance has come to jump Kirby an' says, "Jist becuz I don't like your face I'm goin' to do a small job of smearin'. Take off your coat."

I reckon that's where Mister Lock made his mistake. He has evidently underestimated Francis Kirby. "Jist to be accomodatin'," he says back to Lock. "Somebody hold my coat—"

IT AIN'T no trouble to find someone to do that. You ain't never seen no bloodier fight. They stand up toe to toe an' hammer each other into ribbons of torn flesh. I guess you might say it's a draw up to th' end of th' first ten minutes.

What astonishes all th' spectators is th' way Kirby can take it an' th' way he can give it back. Doc Anderson leaves th' *Four Kings* to fetch his medicine satchel, but he knows he ain't goin' to have no tooth-pullin' to do. Them fighters spit their molars out like they are watermelon seeds.

Kirby's movin' round Lock an' tormentin' him with a straight right jab when th' bully slams over a right uppercut that lifts Kirby clean up outen th' sawdust. He falls flat on his back, an' Lock starts to give him th' boot. But he hasn't figgered on Bertha; she rushes at him, pushin' him back an' screamin', "You yellow polecat—give him a chance! You can't kick him when he's helpless!"

To make an impression on her, Diamond Jack waves a bejeweled hand. "Wait till he climbs up before you give him any more. He's not out yet." He winks at Lock, enjoyin' th' prospect of seein' Kirby get a worse dose of punishment than he has already experienced.

Kirby knows th' brawlin' business. He jist lays there in th' sawdust, gettin' his wind back. Th' crowd is yellin' their heads off for him to get up. They sure have taken a liking to Francis Kirby.

Up he comes. His footwork is something handsome to behold. He parries an' he thrusts an' he keeps pickin' at Lock's busted nose, an' th' bully keeps shakin' his head an' borin' in. You can smell th' sweat of them.

Then there's a smack that almost raises the roof offen th' house. Kirby has driven his right fist into Lock's chin. You can jist about hear Lock's backbone break in two. He stops an' drops, fallin' on his face, an' his shirt is ripped down th' front an' down th' back an' it's soggy with th' blood that has come leakin' out into th' sawdust, havin' dripped from them two wildcats. Lock don't move no more right pronto.

Wa-ll, Bertha takes Francis acrost th' street to th' hotel an' what she does for him puts him back upon his feet in real short order. You ain't seen nothin' like it.

When Saturday night comes it is announced that th' "Lady an' th' Lion" is goin' to be held over by popular request, for another week, an' th' price of admission has gone up to ten dollars for reserved seats.

Sinco is fumin'. For th' first time in his life a pretty woman has given him th' cold shoulder. He figgers Francis Kirby has swept th' lady offen her dainty feet. He makes up his mind he's goin' to smash Kirby one way or

another. Two days later, on Monday mornin', Jack Sinco bets Kirby he can take everything th' other man's got in a single hand of poker.

Kirby laughs at him; he ain't got no time for poker right now, he sez; an' Sinco scoffs at this an' taunts him, them standin' at th' bar. "You ain't got th' guts," Diamond Jack says. "I own th' *Four Kings* an' I got a hundred thousand dollars in cash in th' safe. We'll make it one hand an' it won't last long."

Kirby thinks this over an' drinks his whiskey. They've got a good crowd of listeners around them. Kirby ain't no show-off, so he quietly says, "I'll meet you here Saturday night at eight o'clock. If you want to try your luck then, I'll be ready."

"But what about Bertha an' th' show," Sinco says thoughtful like. "Th' performance starts promptly at eight, I understand."

"Doesn't matter," Kirby says. "It's then or it's not at all."

●

CLYDE DARROW, th' town marshal, has developed a strange fondness for th' big cat, an' he can't leave Nero long enough at a time to do his dooty patrolling th' streets; but don't nothin' much happen. Darrow is a man ain't too many of th' renegades like to challenge. He's good with his guns an' has been a lootenant in th' United States cavalry an' has fought Injuns an' outlaws alike till he has got a fightin' with his shootin' irons down pat. He ain't exactly an educated man, but he's been smart enough to work his way up to a commission from th' rank of a buck private. Yes, suh, him an' Nero almost eat outen th' same dish, they like each other that well.

Jack Sinco figgers while th' town's sleepin' mebbe if he can steal th' lion an' hide him away some place Bertha won't leave Deadman come Sunday. He selects Lock to th' job, him an' six others who are to go to th' opery house right after th' performance Saturday night an' turn th' trick.

But it don't come off jist right. Th' week passes an' in that spell of time both Francis Kirby an' th' connivin' owner of th' *Four Kings* see th' lion lady twice each, an' Francis acts kind of strange. But Diamond Jack he's more cocky than ever. Th' show has packed 'em in; it's sich a howlin' success folks gather over in front of th' opery house along about th' middle of th' afternoon. They stand there waitin' so they'll be sure to get in when th' doors are opened at seven thirty. It sure does fetch th' cash payin' customers.

Wa-ll, Saturday night at eight o'clock, jist as he agreed to do, Francis Kirby enters th' *Four Kings* packin' a heavy satchel, an' at nine o'clock them two men sit down at a deal table, right out in public, to bet all they own on a single hand of draw poker.

Everybody present knows that what they're actually a-playin' for ain't th' money, but th' woman—th' gal with th' long jonquil hair that's ridin' th' big lion with nothin' much on except for them skin-colored tights. At least there's enough of her riggin' showin' to make them sourdoughs cheer her till they can be heard all over th' town.

The opery house is packed to th' gulch, with not enough room for a centipede to crawl without travelin' over miners' boots. They're still a-whoopin an' holler'n an' beggin' for more when th' show ends at ten o'clock.

But before that hour arrives one of th' biggest poker games that has ever been played has been duly executed, an' a man who, twenty-minutes after nine, has lost a fortune, is killed.

An' here's th' amazin' things about it. Diamond Jack Sinco holds four kings which is in keepin' with th' name of his establishment. Francis Kirby he's sittin' here calm as a camel munchin' grass, with four great

big aces in his fist. Th' minute he plunks them down, Jack Sinco knows he's whipped and broke an' that luck has passed him by.

Somethin' has gone wrong with his plans; it's obvious he ain't never figgered he'd lose, even though his opponent is a professional gambler, too. What has gone wrong is plain to some, but others ain't never caught on. Th' new deck he has placed on th' table has been switched for another new one that Kirby has brought along in his pocket for jist sich a purpose.

He looks all around like he's confused an' don't know what has happened to him, an' then he suddenly pushes his chair back away from th' table, an' in th' same instant he's standin' up an' accusin' Francis Kirby of cheatin' him.

As Doc Anderson says, "To call a man a card cheat is jist th' same as to call him a name worse that a mother that ain't been a good woman." Reckon that was so. Kirby turns pale an' slowly rises to his feet an' to his full stature, an' he peers acrost at th' little man whose head don't come up much higher than his shoulders.

"I hate like hell to bust you in two, Sinco," he says, in measured words. "But I 'low you'd better retract them insultin' things you've so deliberately spoken before it's too late to do so. In other words, you'd better apologize to me."

"Never!" Sinco goes mad then. "You couldn't have done that to me honest. You're crazy over Bertha Kerman. It's th' only way you can get her. You swindled me. I demand you play another hand to settle my doubts, and—if you don't, you'll never play another hand in this world, not with me, not with her, not with nobody, Kirby!"

SOMETHING happens then. Kirby reaches quickly over the table. He knows the deck of cards he removed from th' table are stacked and that if they had been used Sinco would have drawed th' four aces, while th' deck he substituted ain't been tampered with in no dishonest way. And he's mad, too, because his honor has been questioned an' becuz he figgers Sinco is goin' to try to do something desperate. He moves around the table pronto.

Sinco screams again at him, as Kirby seizes th' slack in his shirt and draws him to him. He ain't been touched yet, Sinco hasn't, that is he ain't been hurt. But he's crazy blind an' ain't nothin' goin' to prevent what he's planned to do in this insane minute.

Th' crowd rushes out away from them an' seek shelter, all of them excited an' scared of bein' hurt. Kirby's still holdin' to Sinco, an' th' latter has got his hand out of sight inside his black coat. All th' spectators knows what he's got hidden there. It's a gun he carries on a leather harness that encircles his chest. When Kirby starts twistin' on his shirt he practically signs his own death warrant. So it appears—

There's a boom an' a crash! Powder stinking like a fumigatin' candle belches out of Sinco's pistol an' coils around them. Th' muzzle of that little gun ain't more'n five inches away from Kirby's stomach. Th' flame jumps, though, because Francis Kirby has brought his knee up right sudden and when th' slug buries itself in th' floor, Francis gives Sinco a rabbit punch an' knocks him on down to his knees. It's over when Francis steps on Sinco's gun hand an' crunches th' bones till th' fingers spread out an' don't grip th' pistol no more.

Well, everbody's whoopin' an' hollerin' that' it's done and finished with an' that ain't nobody been killed. But they don't know whut's goin' on over in th' opery house. Them henchmen of Sinco's have tried to steal th' lion. He's in his cage, Big Nero is, an' he looks twice as large an' twice as fat, an' when Mister Lock unlocks th' door of th' steel cage, out comes Nero, pawin' an' strikin' and raises Old

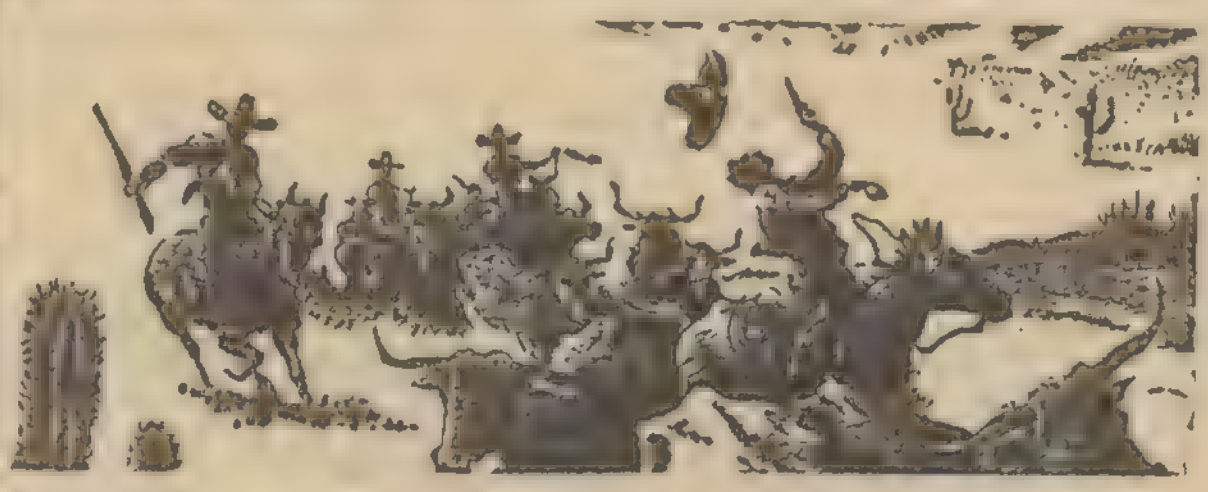
Ned. Since they've been ordered not to hurt th' lion, they can't shoot him. He's so big an' he's so wild an' he's so powerful all they can do is give in to him, and they start runnin' away, him nippin' at their shirt tails.

They burst in through the batwings of th' *Four Kings* hollerin' an' sayin' th' wild animal's loose in town an' for everybody to come an' help corral him. But ain't nobody movin' because while they're pickin' Sinco up out of th' sawdust, a miner has stuck his head in from th' street an' announced some very startlin' news.

"There ain't no need of playin' that poker game," he elucidates. "Th' 'Lady an' th' Lion' have done left town, an' they rigged up a wildcat over there, paintin' him to make him look like a lion, an' puttin' him in th' lion's cage. He ain't no toothless wonder like Big Nero. But th' Lady an' her lion didn't leave this here fair village alone an' unescorted. No, sir; they was accompanied by our town marshal who is th' lady's husband. They was married this afternoon by Doc Anderson. I allow it was a case of true love—"

WE-LL, WHEN we got to Denver we hear all about th' shootin' an' the wildcat that got loose an' went back to th' hills after strippin' Lock's britches offen his skinny legs an' leavin' his red flannels showin', and some mighty big cat-scratches are there in them legs, too. Doc sends me a telegram. It says down at th' tail end of it: "Kirby put Sinco in th' hospital which is Old Lady Noolin's Boardin' House, an' Kirby he's havin' a big laugh. He says th' whole thing had a kind of a sad endin', an' reminds him of Shakespear's *Much Ado About Nothin'*, or was it? Congratulations to you an' if you ever want your old job back as town marshal, you can sure have her. Regards to th' lady, too. An' don't leave Nero out...my tippin' you off to what that gang was goin' to do to Nero—kidnap him—come in handy an' Nero owes me a treat. But so-long, Darrow.

Doc Anderson."



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Danger
Trail
with

THE DEVIL'S HERD

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WESTERN ACTION

The Cross-T cattle were half-mad with thirst.

Jim West had no compunction against riding out on Scotch Tade. But he couldn't leave the Cross T flat, when the dam was broken and cattle were helpless with thirst.

NO WATER FOR THE CROSS-T HERD

By EDWIN K. SLOAT

TIGHT WITH apprehension, Jim West backed against the windmill as the argument in the Cross T ranch yard rose to a white heat. He didn't figure that it involved him too much, since he had been at the Cross T less than a month, but his sympathies were all with Idaho and little Sneed.

Idaho, a big, hulking rider who wore his gun tied down to his leg, with the holster greased, was doing the talking, while little Sneed hovered furtively behind him. Idaho's feet were planted wide and the thumb of his big, sweaty hand hung from the belt above the handle of his gun.

"I'm telling you for the last time, Tade, we want our money. Me and Sneed each got two months' back wages coming, and the kid over there against the windmill has nearly a month. You can't expect us to stay in this dried-out furnace and not get paid for it."

Scotch Tade straightened to his full, lanky height and thrust out his bony chin. His daughter, Mary, who stood beside him, slender and trim in her blue jeans and calico shirt, was white-faced and silent, but her blue eyes glinted angrily and her little chin was lifted defiantly.

"And I'm telling you," rasped Scotch Tade, "that you'll get your money after I make the final payment on the mortgage next month. You understood that plain when you hired on here. I got some money coming in then and I'll be plumb glad to pay you all off and send you kitin'. You're

the poorest bunch of help the Cross T ever had, and right now with the herd all but dyin' in this heat for lack of enough water, you act like a bunch of skunks and come down on me for money before it's due."

"My dad never beat anyone out of a dime," chimed in Mary Tade vehemently. "If you don't believe me, ride into Antlers and ask Mr. Taggert at the bank, or Jones at the store, or anyone else."

"I said," repeated Idaho, "that if we don't get our money now, we're pulling out of here and you can wrassle water for your danged herd by yourself. They don't call you 'Scotch' for nothing; you probably got a whole trunkful of money in the house, but you're too dang stingy even to draw a full breath."

In the tight pause that followed Jim West lifted his eyes to the windmill overhead whirling against the brassy, molten sky. The shaft leading down from the wheel was broken and the pump wasn't working. The plaintive bawling of half dozen hollow-flanked cows at the watering trough was the only sound to be heard. "And I say," Scotch Tade flung savagely at Idaho, "that you're a low-down bunch of skunks that won't keep your word."

"I'm what?" growled Idaho, and his big hand dropped to the waiting handle of his gun.

Scotch Tade went for his gun, too. Mary's shrill scream was cut off by the crash of both weapons. Tade's gun went spinning from his fingers, and a spot of blood appeared at once on his hand. Tade swept up the fallen gun with his left hand. Idaho's six-shooter blasted again. Scotch Tade's right leg crumpled and he collapsed to the ground.

Mary Tade threw herself between him and Idaho's hulking figure. "You've killed him," she sobbed.

"Shootin' a man through the leg don't kill him," said Idaho. "He's so tight he probably won't even bleed like a human. Next time maybe he'll treat his help with some consideration. Come on, and let's get to town and hire us a lawyer to collect our wages," he added turning to little Sneed and Jim West.

Jim West let his breath out. He hadn't even known he was holding it. He mopped his face and turned to his horse. As they headed toward town he glanced back. Mary Tade was helping her father into the ranch house.

The battered wheel of the windmill still whirled in the scorching breeze that blew out of the yawning gateway of Elbow Canyon. A lot of things came out of Elbow Canyon, he thought—the hot midsummer winds, and now and then a traveler from the other side of the ridge, but no water to flow down the little creek beside the road.

But Jim found comfort in the thought of the creek, because a mile or so below the ranch house Scotch Tade had built a dam to save the spring floods to help water his little Cross T herd through the hot weather.

IDAHO AND little Sneed rode in silence. Neither seemed concerned about the shooting of Scotch Tade. The only sound was the bawling of thirsty cows ahead, an unusual sound at this point.

The trio rounded a bend in the road and Jim West straightened in his saddle. "Look!"

"What is it, Kid?" Idaho's sweaty hand swooped to the handle of his gun.

"The dam is busted. Must have happened last night. Now Tade's cattle have no water at all."

Idaho's hand drifted away from his gun, and he and little Sneed stared at the bawling cattle crowded behind the broken dam fighting to get at the tiny pools of water still among the rocks. "We've got to go back," said Jim; "we've got to cobble the windmill together somehow so the cattle can drink."

They eyed him curiously. "Ain't you feeling well, kid?" asked Idaho. "Too

much sun, maybe. Don't you know that old Tade didn't pay your back wages and you quit?"

"Tade can rot for all I care," said Jim West impatiently. "But I can't stand by and see cattle die of thirst in this heat when there's a chance to do something for them. I'd hear them bawling in my sleep for the rest of my days. It won't take us long. I know the windmill shaft is rotted in two and it needs replacing, but we can nail it together with a couple of boards and it'll hold till Tade can get repairs."

Idaho looked at little Sneed who met his glance with a blank expression. Idaho spoke coldly to Jim. "We ain't all loco. Besides there ain't any heavy nails. I looked."

"Well, I'm going back," said Jim West angrily. "I'll get the windmill fixed somehow."

Idaho and Sneed exchanged glances again. Then Idaho spoke jovially. "Good. I like your spirit, kid. It'll make me feel better knowing them cattle will get water. I'd go back myself, but that gal would bushwhack me after what's happened. We'll see you in town later."

●

AS JIM WEST halted his horse in the Cross T ranchyard a bullet whipped up dust beside him and from the house floated the whiplash crack of a winchester. "Get out," called the girl angrily. "Next time I won't miss."

As he hesitated, swift anger boiling within him, a second bullet struck closer.

"I'm not fooling," called Mary Tade.

Jim would have turned then, but he saw the half dozen cows at the tank, the ribs making washboards of their sides, the hollows in their flanks. It checked his anger and disgust. Slowly he lifted his hands. "The dam is busted and there's no water for your herd," he called back. "I came back to try to patch up your windmill."

There was a pause, disturbed only by the bawling cattle. A fresh gust of fiery air from Elbow Canyon spun the windmill faster. Then Mary Tade stepped out of the house, a trim, lithe figure in her jeans and calico shirt. Her rifle still covered him. "If you're lying..." she began.

"Go and see if you don't believe me," he said bitterly. "And get this straight: I didn't come back for any love for your old man. I'm doing this for the cows, and just as soon as I can get the windmill working, I'm pulling out of here."

She came toward him, her face pale under its tan. "Who wrecked the dam?" she demanded. "It wouldn't break by itself in this kind of weather."

He shook his head. "I don't know. Do I try to fix the windmill or do I leave?"

She lowered the rifle. He stepped down from the saddle.

"Stay away from the house," she warned. "Dad has a gun in bed with him, and he'll kill you or either of those other two coyotes on sight. And don't try to trick me, either; I'm still carrying this repeater."

He gave her a scornful look and strode to the barn. Idaho was right: the only nails were too small to do the job right. Jim pocketed a handful and took a hammer and a couple of boards three feet long.

Back at the windmill he tugged at the wire control until he turned the wheel out of the wind, then climbed the wooden tower to the top where he turned the wheel by hand till the rotted ends of the shaft met. Then he nailed the pieces of board on either side of the shaft, and released the wheel to swing back into the wind again.

The shaft began to creak up and down, working the pump, and water began to gurgle out into the tank where the bawling cows fought to get at it.

Jim looked around for the girl and saw her coming from the house, still

cradling the rifle in her forearm. "I told dad what was up," she explained briefly. "Otherwise he might have taken a shot at you."

"If he wasn't so stingy, he'd have repaired the windmill a long while ago," retorted Jim. "Well, it ought to hold for awhile, and since you have no way to get word to town, I'll try to send someone out to fix it right. Before I leave I'll bring up the herd from the dam. And you'd better drive those cows away from the tank before they drink too much at one time, or you'll have fresh trouble."

BACK AT the dam Jim examined the break carefully. Below it, nearly buried in the sand, was a broken pick handle. It explained how the break had occured.

"What's the trouble?" called someone from the road above.

Jim looked up. A big man in a gray store suit, who wore a big grey hat and smoked a black cigar, was watching him from a buckboard.

Jim indicated the hole in the dam. "It's ruined."

"Cross T, eh?" asked the man.

Jim nodded. The man shook the lines, and the rig rolled on up the road. Jim mounted, cut out a dozen cows and followed. His progress was maddeningly slow because the suffering cows wanted to stand and bawl instead of move.

But when they came within fifty feet of the windmill and caught the scent of water, they stampeded for the tank where Mary was keeping the other cattle back to make room for the newcomers. Jim saw the buckboard standing before the kitchen door.

"Sheriff?" he asked, jerking his head toward it.

She gave him a scornful look.

"That's Mr. Taggert, who owns the bank in Antlers and holds the mortgage on our ranch. He heard we were having trouble with you coyotes and came out to offer help. He told Dad he'd be glad to buy the Cross T, but Dad won't sell. So you can stop worrying; it's not the sheriff this time."

"At least you ought to sell him a load of coal from that vein in the hill yonder," retorted Jim, stung by the scorn in her voice. "This is great weather for coal, you know."

"Don't try to be funny," she said sharply. "Mr. Taggert is our friend; he drove all the way out from town in this heat to offer help. And you don't need to make fun of that coal vein either. It's good coal and everybody knows it, even though there's no market for it and never will be. Are you going to help me with the rest of the herd, or do I finish this job alone?"

Jim's face flushed. "I'm helping the cows, not you nor your old man."

As he hazed the next bunch up the road, he met Taggert driving back to town; the banker glanced at him without speaking as he passed.

Jim dismissed him from his mind, and wondered again who had wrecked the dam. Must have been Idaho or Sneed, but it seemed queer that they would have wrecked it before they demanded their back wages. Jim wondered if there was trouble between them and Scotch Tade he knew nothing about.

THE LAST cows were watered by mid-afternoon. "That's that," said Jim, mopping his face. He jerked his saddle off the Cross T horse he was riding and turned to his own bronc.

"Wait," said Mary Tade swiftly. "Wash up; I'll be right back."

She hurried to the house. Jim stared after her, then filled a bucket with water and scrubbed his hands and face. He had nearly finished a cigaret when she returned carrying a plate heaped high with fresh cooked beefsteak and fried potatoes, and a steaming cup of coffee. She set the

food down on the well platform and mopped her face with her apron.

"There's more where that came from," she said.

Jim's face broke into a wide grin. "This is sure swell—"

"You'd better eat and get out of here," she cut in abruptly, and turned back to the house.

Jim wolfed down the food to the last bite, and as he put it into his mouth he saw a stranger on a brown horse turning into the ranch yard, a tall, lanky man who wore a black hat, an unbuttoned vest to which was pinned a shiny sheriff's star.

"You Jim West?"

Jim nodded.

"I'm Sheriff Scott from Antlers and I'm taking you in."

Jim West stood up slowly and passed his gun over to the sheriff. Anger was boiling within him and he shot a bitter glance at the house. The kitchen window framed Mary Tade's face; as he looked, it vanished.

"You ought to know that you can't ruin a man's water supply and take part in shooting him, and not get your come-uppance," said the sheriff. "You sure must have been worried to take a chance of coming back and fixing that windmill expecting him to forgive you. You don't know Scotch Tade; he never forgives anybody for anything."

Jim opened his mouth in angry denial, and shut it again without speaking. It was no use to argue. They were riding toward town when he finally asked,

"How about Idaho and Sneed?"

"I'm picking them up as soon as we hit town," said the sheriff.

MEN STOOD in clusters along Antlers' main street when they rode into town. No one paid any attention to the sheriff and his prisoner. Everyone seemed to be arguing excitedly, and some brandished newspapers.

"What's the pow-wow?" Sheriff Scott asked the fat jailor as he locked Jim West in a cell. "Looks like election day."

"Ain't had a chance to find out," replied the jailor. "The *Weekly Echo* came off the press about fifteen minutes ago and the town's been in an uproar ever since. I reckon Editor Young sprung one of his scoops—likely tossed the ink pot at some of our respectable citizens."

"I've got to round up a couple of hombres," said the sheriff turning to the door. "Get the bull-pen ready; I'll be back shortly."

He departed, and the jailor, after making certain Jim was locked up, went outside to see what the excitement was. Jim sat down on his bunk gloomily, wondering what Idaho and Sneed would say when the sheriff brought them in.

Outside, the late afternoon sun lengthened the shadows but the crowd still milled around the sidewalks and in the saloons. Sheriff Scott didn't come back. Finally the fat jailor came in with a copy of the little weekly paper under his arm, carrying Jim's supper which he shoved under the barred door.

"The excitement is a railroad is coming to Antlers," he told Jim. "But I want to read it out of the paper myself. Dang the editor! Why didn't he fetch me a paper instead of making me go to his printing shop and get one."

Jim didn't answer; he cared nothing about a railroad just now. Freedom was the only thing that meant anything and it seemed farther away with every passing moment. For the thousandth time he berated himself for having gone back to fix the windmill.

Sheriff Scott came in about eight o'clock. He flung himself scowling into a chair. "They're gone," he said savagely. "They were in the *Palace Bar* just before I left for the Cross T, and now nobody knows where they are. Must have got wind something

was up. I should have picked 'em up then, but old Tade sent word to hurry. The kid yonder will have to take the jolt for all three of them, I reckon, although I personally think he's less to blame than the other two. But you know how Scotch Tade is; he'll send that kid to prison. Well, I'm going over to the Greasy Spoon and lay into some steak and eggs."

Jim gave himself up to black despair then. He lay flat on his bunk in the darkened cell and cursed the day he'd come down through Elbow Canyon riding grubline and took a job at the Cross T.

How long he lay there he didn't know, but it couldn't have been more than a few minutes when something dropped from the open window to the floor. He got up and fumbled around till he found it, a small pebble. He stepped to the little window.

"That you, kid?" whispered someone outside.

"Yeah."

"Here." Something was thrust through the bars, and Jim's fingers felt the familiar outlines of a sixshooter. "This is Idaho. We got your horse out here. Sneed is going round now and get the jailor out of the way. He'll unlock your cell. Don't use the gun unless things go sour. We had to wait till it got dark before we could do anything."

"This is sure swell of you," whispered Jim. "I'd given up hope."

"We stick by a pal, kid; we like your spirit."

The jailor was reading aloud to himself from the little weekly paper, spelling out the big words, when Sneed called to him from the darkness of the street. Sneed was breathing heavily as though he had been running.

"It's your wife," he panted. "The stove upset. She's in trouble."

With a cry the jailor sprang up and plunged out of the door. When the sound of his running feet faded up the board walk, Sneed slipped into the office like a furtive ghost, seized the keys from their nail beside the battered desk, and swiftly unlocked Jim's cell. He darted out of the office again, and Jim eased open the door, and stepped out of his cell.

As he passed the desk the headlines of the *Weekly Echo* caught his eye. "RAILROAD COMING TO ANTLERS" and below it in only slightly smaller type, "ECHO EDITOR LEARNS FROM FRIEND IN EAST THAT DEAL IS MADE". And below that in type that was almost as large: "TRANSCONTINENTAL TO BUILD BRANCH LINE FROM NORTH."

There was more but Jim West didn't wait to read it.

"We got your back wages, too," said Idaho when Jim located him and Sneed and the horse behind the jail. "Got a full month for you instead of just three weeks; we told the lawyer how you'd gone back to fix the windmill, and he said that was worth an extra week's pay."

"How did the lawyer get the money?" asked Jim, puzzled.

"These lawyers can do anything, kid," said Idaho jovially. "Scotch Tade had a wad of dough in the bank just like we figured, and the lawyer got a legal paper that said we could collect our back wages from it. That's how these law sharks work. Now you'd better hit the Indian Trail; it leads straight to the Border. You'll have such a long lead the law will never catch up with you."

"But you rannies are coming, too, ain't you?"

Idaho hesitated. Little Sneed cleared his throat. "Well, now—" he began in his whiney voice.

"Sure, we're coming!" cut in Idaho heartily. "We'll catch up with you. You see, kid, the lawyer only got enough money to pay your wages, and we had to get you out of that jail. He says he'll get ours first thing in the morning. Now you'd better hit the trail, kid. We like your spirit and we'd hate to see you back in that stinking jail after we got you out of it. We'll see you later."

JIM DIDN'T think much about it as he rode cautiously out of town and picked up the old Indian Trail south under the stars. Freedom was too exciting. But presently when he calmed down and thought it over, the whole escape deal seemed too slick, somehow. He didn't know how lawyers collected debts for people, but he was pretty sure they didn't get money from bank funds as quick as that.

Maybe the money wasn't real. But when he stopped and lit a match he found he had two new twenty-dollar bills.

Why should anyone wreck Tade's water supply, he asked himself. It looked like somebody wanted to get Tade off the ranch, although that didn't seem reasonable either, the Cross T being what it was, just a little back country spread. Jim had never heard any talk of a land-hog wanting it.

Abruptly Jim found himself thinking of the headlines in the *Weekly Echo:* "RAILROAD COMING TO ANTLERS....BRANCH LINE FROM NORTH." Then Jim understood. Elbow Canyon was the only pass through the hills anywhere around and the railroad would have to come through it.

The Cross T had a vein of coal, too. Probably a division point would be established at the canyon mouth. Yes, the Cross T was going to be mighty valuable now and Taggert, the banker, knew it, because he must have had inside information that the railroad was coming. Now that the news was out, Taggert would have to act mighty fast...

Jim West halted his horse, staring wide-eyed in the darkness. A man who would wreck a dam, and would hire a couple of hardcases to shoot old Scotch Tade in an argument over wages, wouldn't hesitate to go a great deal farther. Which was why Idaho and Sneed hadn't come along with Jim now.

Jim shook the reins and moved on down the road. It wasn't any of his business, he told himself angrily; the Tades had sure handed him a dirty deal.

The horse walked a few yards, then Jim hauled it around suddenly and put spurs to it. This was just like the cow deal, he told himself bitterly. He couldn't sleep in peace if he didn't let the Tades know their danger. But that was all he'd do; just go to the Cross T and tell them what was up—provided they didn't shoot him first.

He laughed mirthlessly and urged his horse to greater speed.

He swung wide past Antlers and came back on the Canyon road. With every passing mile the need for hurry seemed to grow. But when he drew near the Cross T he became wary. Idaho and Sneed might hear him coming; he wondered what he'd tell them if they discovered him.

AGAINST the slope of the ridge ahead a spot of gold began to glow. As Jim stared it grew, and he knew that the ranch buildings had been fired. He was too late. For the last time he tried to tell himself to get out of this while he still had a chance, that it wasn't his fight and he had every right to stay out of it.

Instead he spurred his weary horse forward. Faintly he could hear the sound of gunfire.

When he could see the battered fan of the windmill spinning eerily in the light of the leaping flames, he left his horse and ran ahead on foot, sixshooter in hand.

A twist in the road showed him the blazing barn. The roof had already fallen in and the walls were about to collapse. Three figures stood blackly outlined against the flames, protected from the house by the blazing structure. He recognized them as Idaho, little Sneed, and Taggert, the banker.

Jim moved aside, putting the corral between himself and the group, and sneaked forward.

Taggert was cursing Sneed. "Why didn't you get closer? You can throw a brand only so far, and it fell short by ten feet."

"They were shooting at me," whined Sneed. "I didn't dare go beyond the wagon."

"You'll go beyond it this time!" raged Taggert. "I'm holding a rifle on you, and if you don't set fire to that house, I'll cut you down from here. And it's got to be done pronto while the barn is still burning big so that we'll have light to nail them when they come out."

"What if they tell on us?" Sneed's voice was panicky.

"Do I have to go over it again?" roared Taggert. "Listen, you knothead: When they're found tomorrow or next week, everybody will know that the kid who broke jail tonight came out here and killed 'em for revenge. Now do you understand? Idaho, make your sneak around behind the house and nail 'em if they try to escape that way. Now, Sneed, get set."

Idaho vanished into the darkness, and Sneed picked up a piece of burning wood that had fallen from the barn.

Behind the corral Jim West lifted the heavy sixshooter, levelled it at Sneed, then lowered it again; he dare not risk a shot yet. Idaho was the most dangerous of the three. Jim had to figure how to get him first if possible.

Sneed sprang up and darted around the blazing barn, head down, and made for the cover of the wagon which stood between the house and barn. Taggert covered him with a couple of quick shots at the door and window of the house.

Sneed reached the wagon, leaped on past it for ten or twelve feet, paused and hurled the blazing stick of wood. It circled over in a whirling fiery arc and crashed down on the dry, weathered shingles of the house. Sneed spun and dove for the protection of the wagon.

Jim caught glimpse of old Scotch Tade propped up beside the kitchen window, shooting lefthanded. Gunfire stabbed from the window. Sneed stumbled, and went down; he rolled into a huddle and lay still.

At that instant the first of the walls of the barn collapsed in a huge geyser of flame and sparks. Taggert turned and raced for the protection of the corral before the other barn walls fell and left him exposed to Tade's bullets.

TAGGERT almost reached the corral when the second wall went down. The flare-up of flame revealed Jim West poised with gun upraised to club him down. Jim wanted no shooting to warn Idaho on the far side of the house. Taggert threw up the rifle, but Jim leaped on him, and the descending gun barrel smashed against Taggert's fore arm.

The rifle slipped from his numbed hand, and Taggert whirled with a terrified cry, and plunged for his groundtied horse nearby. Jim leaped after him, stumbled, and went sprawling. He recovered to see Taggert flinging himself into the saddle.

Jim whipped up the sixshooter, but the horse, already terrified by the burning barn, came charging at him. Ducking frantically aside, Jim struck blindly at Taggert as the animal went past. Jim missed, and the descending gun barrel slammed into the horse's flank.

With a scream the horse twisted in mid-air and came down bucking. Taggert, already off balance, slipped out of the saddle; his foot caught in the stirrup, and the maddened horse bucked and kicked off into the darkness, dragging the screaming, helpless man.

Above the crackling of flames came a sound of a shod hoof smashing into flesh and bone, and Taggert's screaming ended abruptly. A strap snapped in two. The horse, freed of its dragging burden, broke into a wild run off into the distance.

Jim crept forward, gun ready. He dare not leave Taggert alive behind him. He stumbled over the banker's body and felt the throat. There was no pulse. Taggert was dead.

Jim raced for the house.

Then out of the smoking doorway came Mary Tade and her father. She was staggering under his weight as he leaned heavily on her and dragged his helpless leg. His wounded arm was around her neck, while his left had gripped his .44.

"Hurry!" yelled Jim, racing toward them.

Scotch Tade saw him. He whipped up the gun. Mary too, had seen Jim. Instantly she threw her weight against her father, spoiling his aim. The bullet smashed into the ground. Jim leaped forward and twisted the gun from Scotch Tade's hand before he could shoot again.

"Jim, thank gawd it's you!" sobbed the girl.

"Hurry, hurry!" urged Jim, pulling Scotch Tade to his feet again. "We've got to get to the corral! Idaho is behind the house—"

His words broke off as he saw the hulking figure of Idaho step into view round the corner of the house a dozen feet away, gun in hand.

Jim let Scotch Tade slump down again, and straightened slowly. Mary shrank down on the ground beside her father as though to protect him from the death that was already reaching for them. Jim felt the dead weight of the sixshooter in his fist and knew dully that Idaho would never let him get it up to fire. Idaho would shoot it out of his hand, then hammer the second bullet through his heart while he stood helpless and waiting.

Idaho paused and stared at them. Then he deliberately shoved his gun back in its down-tied holster, but his hairy fist hovered near it. Jim knew that Idaho was mocking him, daring him to shoot it out; Idaho was revelling in the drama of the moment.

"Well, well, if it ain't the kid," said Idaho jovially, as he twisted the heels of his boots into the ground for a firmer footing against the coming gunplay. "I always did like your spirit, kid—specially the way you stick your nose into what ain't good for you."

He paused, and Jim found himself thinking, oddly, of the proud, defiant way Mary Tade and her father had come staggering out the smoke-filled door a moment ago, ready to go down fighting and un-afraid.

Then he remembered something his dad had said years ago: "If you know a gunman is going to shoot, don't wait for him to get started for his gun, or you're lost. Shoot right away; lot of fast men have lost their lives to slower men because they wanted to show off first."

Jim West whipped up the sixshooter waist high and fired point blank. Idaho saw the movement too late; he hadn't expected this. His hand slapped leather with its practised speed. The gun came clear and blasted. But Idaho was already collapsing and the bullet struck in the dirt beside Jim West's foot.

Jim fired again as Idaho went down. But there was no need. Idaho was dead when he slumped to the ground.

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"I NEVER thought I'd live to see the day I'd apologize to anybody," said Scotch Tade from the bottom of the wagon as they jolted toward Antlers. "But I saw it tonight, and I'm apologizing to you, Jim West, for the dirty way I treated you. Mary tried to tell me that a rannie who'd come back to water the herd wouldn't have busted the dam in the first place, but I wouldn't listen to her, and told Taggert to send out the sheriff for you. And I sure wish you'd stick with me. I've got to rebuild the Cross T and lay out a new town site when the railroad comes through."

"He'll stay," said Mary Tade, secretly squeezing Jim's hand. "We've already arranged for that, haven't we, Jim?"

The Cactus Kid lived up to his reputation for having a fast gun.

THE SHOW - OFF

By BEN FRANK

"It's bad medicine, Kid, goin' back to your old home town, especially when you were run out of it!"

THE CACTUS KID was a show-off. The reason for that was the yellow streak running up and down his back; showing off was his way of hiding the yellow streak.

He walked with a bad limp—most people figured he'd stopped a bullet in a gun fight, and he never told anyone any different—but he was as quick as a cat with his hands. He was worse than rattler mean, because he didn't have any rattles to warn anyone before he struck. It wasn't long until he had the law-abiding citizens along the border scared stiff, and they put a price on his head, dead or alive.

That made him feel like pretty big stuff. He finally got so swell-headed about himself that he forgot his yellow streak and decided to visit his old home town and show the home folks a thing or two. So one day, he told his two partners in crime of his intentions.

"Don't do it, Cactus," Joe Brett had warned; "it's bad medicine, goin' back to your old home town, especially when you was run out of it."

"That's right," Charley Link had added. "You may be the Cactus Kid here in the border country, but back in your home town, yuh'll still be that no-account, ornery Beal kid. Besides, we need your help to round up that cattle of—"

"The cattle can wait," the Cactus Kid had cut in grimly. "I got a score to settle back home, and I been putting off the settlement too long. Adios, amigos."

And now he was back with the late afternoon sun throwing his shadow against the scant, dry grass.

It had been a long ride, this coming back to the little cowtown of Clifton; but staring down into the valley out of hard, narrowed eyes, the Cactus Kid figured that the heat and the dust and the tiresomeness of the trip were nothing as compared with the satisfaction he'd feel before the day ended. Especially if old man Benton, the town marshal, were still living. And if he, the Cactus Kid, could be seen the way he was now by Sally Long, old Doc Long's daughter.

His pale blue eyes shifted from the few drab houses to the rocky cliff that formed a red backdrop for the town. Just seeing the cliff sent a twitching pain through his right leg. He'd been a spindly, narrow-shouldered smart-aleck of a kid when he had fallen down that cliff, breaking his right leg. The pain had made him sick. It had been something pretty horrible until old Doc Long had given him a shot in the arm. Right away, the pain had eased off, and he'd gone to sleep.

And thinking of Doc Long, he thought of Doc's love for flowers. The house and the yard were full of them. All kinds. Everything from desert plants to huge roses. Doc was crazy about flowers, and Sally wasn't much better that way.

As for Sally—the Kid's pale eyes smouldered. To Sally he'd been little better than the dirt under her feet. Not that Sally was high-hat; she just didn't like anyone who wouldn't behave himself. Once he'd tried to kiss her, and she'd hauled off and slapped the daylights out of him. She was tall and strong and had coppery hair and blue eyes that could blaze with anger, or glow with a soft, tender light.

The sting of her blows had gone down deep inside him and had stayed with him all the years he'd been making a name for himself with his six-guns. The memory of those blows was one of the things that had brought him back. That and his desire to watch the town quake under the terror of his fast-shooting guns when he went after old man Benton, the marshal.

THE LONG fingers of one hand moved caressingly over the black, slick grip of a twin Colt as he turned his long-legged roan into the trail that led down into the town. In spite of the journey, the animal was still fresh and eager to move forward. That was because the Kid had been saving him for the get-away after he'd finished his work in Clifton. A man with a price on his head always had to plan ahead for a get-away.

Again he thought of Phil Benton. His hate for the man went back to the time the oldster had taken him in hand, turned him over a knee and whaled him good for throwing rocks through the schoolhouse windows. Then, five years later, the old marshal had run him out of town.

"This ain't no place for the likes of you!" the lawman had said angrily. "Get out, and stay out!"

Remembering back, the Kid's narrow face hardened, and he urged the roan into a canter.

Before he reached the first house, he met a tow-headed button and a flop-eared hound. He pulled his roan to a stop, and the hound sniffed at the horse's heels and growled. The Kid grinned down at the boy, but the

button didn't grin back. Maybe that was because he didn't like the Cactus Kid's bony face with its close-set, pale, dangerous eyes.

The Kid fished out a silver dollar and flipped it toward the boy. It fell short and plunked into the trail, kicking up a little puff of gray dust. "Live hereabouts?" the Kid asked.

The boy stared down at the dust-covered dollar and then lifted his wide eyes back to the hard, grinning face. "Yeah," he answered.

He didn't make a move to pick up the coin.

"Bet you don't know old Phil Benton?" the Kid said.

"Sure. That is—he's dead and buried."

That jolted the Cactus Kid. "Dead?" he muttered.

"Pneumonia," the boy said.

The Kid swore under his breath; he felt cheated. With old Benton already dead, the trip back seemed hardly worth while. But the Cactus Kid was still a yellow-streaked show-off—and he remembered Sally Long.

"Bet you don't know Doc Long," he said.

"Sure, I know him. We owe him for some medicine. He raises flowers. Brought some to my Ma, Sally did, when she was sick."

"Sally Long?"

The boy nodded. "She works for Doc. Takes care of the office when Doc's away like he is today."

The Cactus Kid straightened a little in the saddle. "How you know Doc's away today?"

"Saw him hook up his hoss to the buggy and drive outa town."

"That dollar's yours, squirt."

The boy stared down at the coin and dug his bare toes into the dust. He still didn't pick it up. "Why's it mine?" he blurted.

The Cactus Kid shrugged, laughed. "Because you're such a smart and handsome squirt," he answered, and rode on.

When he glanced back, the boy was still staring down at the silver dollar, and the hound was sniffing suspiciously at it.

CHUCKLING, the Cactus Kid rode along the rutted Main Street, taking his own sweet time. A few people stood here and there on the board walks, eyeing him curiously. There was old man Palmer, the post master. Jud Lee, who ran the feed store. And Nick Miles, the town loafer. But no one seemed to recognize the Kid.

Of course, that wasn't surprising, the way he had his hat pulled low over his eyes. He'd changed a lot in the last five years, too. He'd been run out, a ragged, scrawny, trouble making youngster and now had come back, a man dressed like a million. Expensive black Stetson. Fancy clothes. Hand-tooled boots. A pair of solid silver Mexican spurs. A silver trimmed saddle. Twin guns in fancy black holsters. It would be fun, he thought, watching the slow-thinking citizens of Clifton when it began to soak with them who had returned to pay his old home town a visit.

He came to the side-street that led past Doc Long's place, and pulled his roan to a slow walk. He was tempted to ride to the flower bordered house and walk in on Sally. But he wanted to do a little showing off around town first. There was the Elk Saloon, from which he'd been kicked more times than he could remember. His thin face hardened. They wouldn't kick him out today.

He halted the roan in front of the saloon and slid to the ground. His pale eyes went over the false-fronted, paint-peeled building. Five years had changed it little.

Walking into the place, he limped as he always did when he hurried a little. It was his right leg reminding him of the fall down the cliff. The leg always pained a little worse when there was to be a change in the weather. It had never been much good for walking since he'd broken it. For a

moment, his mind flashed back to the time old Doc had given him a shot in the arm. If it hadn't been for that, he guessed he'd gone crazy with the pain.

His shaded eyes moved about the room. A half-dozen men stood at the bar. Tom Avery, the barkeep, had his back to the door and was dropping change into the till. The other men gave the Cactus Kid a casual glance and returned to their drinks. Only one of them turned for a second look. He was Fred Brink, the barber.

The Kid felt a warming glow of satisfaction move through him. Everyone of these men had at one time or another expressed dislike for him. Now, his turn had come to show them a few things.

He tipped the big hat back from his face, for it was time to let people begin to recognize him. He shoved up to the counter and tapped a coin on the pine top for attention.

"Beer," he said in a loud, show-off voice.

HIS FLORID face wearing a smile, Tom Avery turned from the till. His blue eyes moved up from the coin in the Kid's long fingers to the hard, narrow face under the black Stetson. A puzzled frown creased his forehead as he reached for a mug.

"Changed my mind," the Kid said, leaning over the counter. "Make it straight whiskey."

Tom Avery looked at him again, more closely this time. "Where've I seen you before?" he asked.

The Kid laughed; this was getting good. Everyone was eyeing him curiously, thinking back, trying to place this strange gunman with all his fine clothes and the thin disguise that five years of growth had given him. Any minute now, someone would say in an awed voice, "It's the Cactus Kid!"

He backed from the counter so he'd have plenty of room to go for his guns when the right time came.

"Changed my mind again!" he said harshly. "Just remembered the kind of low-grade rot-gut you sell here; you can keep it for your customers who don't know good liquor from bad!"

It was old man Brink, the barber, who recognized him first. The oldster's eyes bugged slightly, and his breath wheezed through his gaping mouth.

"Hey," he said, "ain't you that Beal kid?"

So Charley Link had been right, after all. Down on the border, he might be the Cactus Kid, a quick-trigger big-shot, but here in Clifton, he was still that Beal kid.

A cold fury swept over him. Before he left town, they'd realize their mistake. They'd know that Eddie Beal of five years ago, the kid who was always getting himself into small-time trouble, was no more. They'd soon know what it was to have the Cactus Kid, the big-time trouble maker, move in on them.

"Yeah," he said, fixing his eyes on Tom Avery's florid face, "it's the Beal kid. Only he goes by a different name these days. Where I just come from, they call him the Cactus Kid. Know why? It's because cactus is something you can't rub up against without getting hurt! Get it?"

They were getting it. He could tell by the tightness that had come to their faces. They'd heard plenty about the Cactus Kid. Now they were getting it through their thick heads that the fast shooting terror of the border and Eddie Beal were one and the same. It was coming to them, too, that Eddie Beal had come back with the chip already knocked from his shoulder.

The Kid dropped his long fingers to his guns and shook them free of the holsters. Under the tightness in the men's faces, he saw the beginning of fear. A feeling of exultation swept through him. It seemed that he'd lived all his life for these few moments.

"Now, Eddie," Tom Avery began hoarsely, "if you're smart, you won't start any trouble, for—"

The big Colts blurred upward. It

was the famous Cactus Kid lightning draw. The Kid squeezed the trigger of his right gun, and the face of the clock on the back wall went to pieces in a burst of thunder. His left gun crashed, and a thousand crazy cracks spread across the large mirror behind Tom Avery's back.

Blue smoke curled up lazily toward the ceiling in the deep hush that followed the two shots. Avery's face had turned white. No one made a move to do anything about the Kid. No one made a move of any kind, not even to draw a breath for a long moment.

WITH A deft twist of his wrists, the Kid holstered his guns. The motion was almost too quick for the eye to follow. It left the men gaping at his empty hands.

"Maybe I'll have a snort of that rot-gut, after all," he said. "The best you got, Tom, and don't spend all day getting it!"

Tom Avery's fat hands shook so that he had trouble unscrewing the cap off the bottle.

He started to set the bottle on the counter, and the Kid snapped, "Pour it, you lazy bum!"

Face suddenly flushing, Avery tipped the bottle toward a glass. The Kid's right hand blurred, came up with a blazing gun; and the bottle smashed into flying fragments. The barkeep stared at his empty hand. A trickle of blood oozed from where a splinter of glass had cut his wrist.

The startled expression on the man's face was too much for the Kid. He laughed uproariously. "I didn't like the looks of that bottle, Tom," he gasped. "Fetch me another."

The Cactus Kid took his time about downing the drink, all the while watching the men over his glass. They were openly frightened, and the satisfaction he felt at seeing their fear was something he would have liked to stretch out for hours. But he knew time was running out on him. A man with a price on his head soon learns not to tarry too long in a law-abiding town. He knew he had to be in the safety of the timbered hill country by dark.

The drink finished, he smashed the glass against the brass rail at his feet.

"Gents," he said harshly, "don't be in no hurry about sticking your mangy heads outdoors. I might take a notion to wait and take a shot at the first man who comes outside. Adios, amigos."

He backed through the batwing, leaped across the board walk and swung into the saddle. No one ventured from the saloon. He set spurs to the roan and turned back along the way he had come. The street was empty. He had everything his own way: a fast horse under him, plenty of time to reach the safety of the hills before dark. But when he came to the street that led to Doc Long's place, he knew what he had to do to make his visit to Clifton completely satisfying. He had to see Sally Long. He had to show-off in front of her. Maybe, he'd even kiss her.

Thinking of kissing her, he grinned widely. No woman had ever slapped the Cactus Kid and gotten away with it.

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DOC'S NEAT, white painted house gleamed in the flower bedecked lawn. Still grinning, the Kid reached down, unlatched the gate and rode across the well-tended front yard. Near the house, he slid to the ground and led his roan into a bed of Doc's prize flowers.

"Help yourself, boy," he said. "Nothing's too good for the Cactus Kid's horse."

Doc Long used the front room of his house for an office. Painted on the door were the words, *Walk In*. The Kid walked in.

A bell tinkled someplace in the back part of the house. When the Kid shut the door, the bell rang again. It was the same old bell which had rung when he'd hobbled into the room on crutches to let Doc have a look at his

leg. It had been a bad break, and his leg had never been quite the same again. Remembering the pain, he shuddered slightly. He never had had any stomach for pain.

An inner door opened, and Sally Long came into the room, dressed in a nurse's uniform. White was a good color for her. It enhanced the healthy tan of her face and arms, and added deep lights to the coppery sheen of her hair. She didn't look so tall now, but that was likely because the Kid had grown taller himself in the past five years.

She was prettier than he remembered her. Looking at her, he realized that now he could break her in two with his bare hands. "Is there something—" she began.

Then she recognized him, and her fingers whitened against the back of a chair. "Eddie Beal!" She said his name like it was a bad taste in her mouth.

The Kid felt his face flushing, and it made him furious. It seemed to take these Clifton people a long time to catch on to things. Well, he'd show this girl a few things right quick. He hooked his thumbs under his gun belts and took a menacing step toward her.

The girl didn't back away from him. She stood there, gripping the chair back, her blue eyes fixed on him. "What are you doing here?" she demanded.

"Come back to pay the old home town a visit," he said. Even if she didn't let on, she was afraid of him. He knew that by the way her pulse ticked too fast in her slender throat. Suddenly he felt good again. "Knew you wouldn't want me to pass you up," he added.

Now he stood directly in front of her, grinning down at her, remembering back to the time she'd slapped him. She'd have a tussle on her hands if she tried to slap him now. Outside, a dog began to bark furiously. Inside the room, there wasn't any sound except the girl's too fast breathing. It went on like that for a long time, their eyes locked, each determined to out-stare the other.

But the girl couldn't take the stare of those pale, smouldering eyes. She looked away and said huskily, "Get out of here, Eddie Beal!"

"Sally," he said mockingly, "you're using the wrong name. I'm the Cactus Kid. Know why people call me that? It's because—"

The bell tinkled cheerfully in the back part of the house, and the Kid whirled toward the front door, his hands falling to his guns.

THE DOOR opened, and the tow-headed boy, whom he'd met on the trail, shuffled into the room. He held a bright silver dollar in his fingers. It was a clean dollar with all the trail dust carefully wiped off.

He held the money toward Sally Long and smiled. "I brought this to help pay for Ma's med—"

His eyes fixed on the Cactus Kid. His small face stiffened, and his eyes blazed angrily. "Your roan hoss," he said, "got into one of Doc's flower beds, so I sicked my dog on him. I knowed that Doc would be mighty upset if that hoss et—"

The Kid didn't wait to hear another word. He made a limping leap for the door and flung it wide. His roan no longer stood in the trampled flower bed. He wasn't in the clean, neat yard; he wasn't in sight anywhere.

The Kid lunged through the door and down the porch steps, wincing at the sharp pains that shot up through his right leg. Around the corner of the house, he saw his horse racing away along the street with the boy's hound dog nipping at the flying hoofs.

Cursing furiously, the Kid ran through the open gate into the street after the horse. A half-block later, he saw something that stopped him flat-footed. Two riders with rifles slung across their saddles were coming his way. One of them was Tom Avery, the barkeep. The other, a youngish man, wore a lawman's badge on his shirt front.

The Cactus Kid looked wildly about for a shelter. A tree. Or a ditch. Anything that would offer protection from rifle lead.

There weren't any trees large enough to hide behind, and the street was as flat as a floor. There remained one possibility: run for the open doorway of Doc Long's house.

He turned and headed for the gate. His right leg was no good in this kind of a race. Every pounding step sent a sharp pain grinding through him. He knew he'd never make the house in time. Would be lucky if he got as far as the front gate.

With a hoarse curse, he shucked his guns and turned on the two riders. Sixguns against rifles. He didn't have a chance and he knew it. The yellow streak in him took over suddenly, and he started to throw his guns away. But the men thought he was going to fight.

A rifle shot rang out, and the Kid's right leg buckled. He fell sideways, turned over on his back and sat up. His bulging eyes fixed on a widening red spot just above his knee. That was where he'd broken his leg years ago. Just above the knee.

Then the pain began.

IT WAS the same sickening kind of pain he'd felt when he'd fallen from the cliff. Horror filled him. A man couldn't stand pain like that. It dug into you like a hot iron. It made you scream for help. It—

He put his hands over his face. He was no longer the Cactus Kid, the trigger-quick show-off of the border. He was just that no-good ornery Beal kid with a broken leg.

"Help, help!" he screamed. "It's killin' me! I can't stand it! Somebody do somethin', please!"

Someone hovered over him. Vaguely he realized that Sally Long was kneeling beside him, a hypodermic syringe in her capable hands. The same hands that had slapped him long ago when he'd tried to kiss her. And on her face, he saw the look of utter contempt. The same contempt she'd always felt for the worthless, trouble making Eddie Beal.

He felt the sting of the needle, the bite of the medicine, the easing off of pain, the beginning of drowsiness. Something kept trying to edge into his mind. Something about still being Eddie Beal here in his old home town, instead of being—

But he went to sleep before he got it figured out.

SATAN RIDES THE WASATCH

(Continued From Page 25)

In Steve's nostrils was the fresh smell of the watered and fertile earth and the perfume of the girl's hair.

Bess looked at him in a queer mixture of pride and shyness, her full lips parted. Then she said good-by to all the teachings of her past and gave full rein to her freedom loving spirit.

"I was praying for thee," she admitted, "because I love thee."

And Steve Farrell knew at that moment, that the trail ahead however long, could never again be lonely.

"Woman," Reagon O'Connor said grumpily, standing in the kitchen he had reached only after a circuitous route behind the barn, "keep thine eyes from that window."

His wife smiled timidly, a little confusedly, and turned toward him. As she laid her hand on his big arm Reagon absently patted the work-worn fingers, and then, for some reason completely inexplicable, bent and kissed her cheek.

"Tell me," he whispered, "what were the children doing as thou watched?"

THE FEUD

FEATURE NOVEL

OF SINISTER TREACHERY

By Arthur Lawson

NED HALEY first learned of the feud when he rode into town that Saturday night for supper at the hotel and a little relaxation afterwards. Ned had been working like a dog for nearly six weeks, setting up his new place and getting acquainted with the range. He had been sleeping in his clothes, eating cold meals, and whacking brush until he felt he could not bear to spend another minute in the saddle. He reckoned that a hot bath, a steak dinner, a game of billiards, or even a girl to talk to at the *Crystal Palace* would set him up for another six weeks. But he ran into the feud.

The hotel barber, being very careful to hold the razor away from his lathered throat, asked cagily: "Have any trouble with the Telegraph outfit yet, Mr. Haley?"

"Why—no!" Ned said. "Why would I?"

"There's bad blood between the Telegraph and the Haystack."

Ned sat up like a Jack-in-Box. The Telegraph outfit was not in the business of sending messages; it had earned its name from the Double T brand of the Tuck ranch that bordered Ned's new Haystack spread clear up the valley and bore an iron that looked like a telegraph pole with two crossbars. Ned controlled all the land on one side of the river and the Telegraph had everything on the other side. Nice and convenient—plenty of grass and water—and an obvious boundary line between them to keep them good neighbors.

Indignantly Ned said: "There couldn't be bad blood between the Telegraph and the Haystack; I haven't even met anybody over there. I'm new in this country. My crew is new. My cows are new. Why in Hell

The bloody feud between the Telegraph outfit and the Haystack spread was dead and buried—so they said. But now, something was conspiring to bring it back to ghastly life, and Ned Haley found that he hadn't bought an outfit, but a graveyard...

Haley couldn't shuck this girl, and he didn't want to...

should I have trouble with the Telegraph?"

"Maybe I spoke out of turn," the barber said. "Just set back, Mr. Haley, and I'll finish this job."

"Before I set back," Ned Haley said, "I'd like to know whose side you're on; I don't aim to have my throat cut."

"I'm not on nobody's side," the barber insisted. "That trouble was here when I come. Me, I'm neutral."

Ned nestled into the chair, but did not feel at all relaxed there. He had left Texas because of fights with heelflies, heat and maverickers, had sold out everything down there to come up to Wyoming for a fresh start. The Haystack had struck him instantly as the ideal spot in which to realize his ambitions. He liked the town and the men he had met while looking around; there had been no hint that there was a ready-made feud included with his range.

The barber slapped on hot cloths and waved the towel at him while a colored boy worked saddle-soap into his boots and belt. Ned seldom wore a holster gun while in town; a double-barrelled Derringer in a spring clip under his jacket was all the armament he figured he would need. Since he had no intention of picking a fight, and not an enemy in the state, carrying a heavier shooting iron seemed unnecessary. But when he left the barber-shop he felt mighty uneasy. He wished old Jose was with him, or Jerry Marquette, or that the night was not so dark—or that he knew more about this "bad blood."

Yet, watching him amble up the boardwalk to the Eagle Hotel nobody would have guessed that he had any troubles. He walked with an easy, rolling gait something like a sailor's. His quick glance took in everything; the dusty church, the brightly-painted honkeytonk; the drunk, the men he did not know but soon must count among his friends or enemies. A few faces were familiar, and more than one citizen nodded or called him by name.

WHEN HE STOPPED at the hotel lobby for a cigar Ned was pleased to see that the owner, Phil Eams, was at the desk. Instinctively he trusted Eams, who had seen plenty of life cross his lobby. The old-timer was like the eagle after which his hotel had been named; white of head, sharp of eye, and hooked of nose, not missing anything that passed by.

"It seems like I'm at war with the Telegraph outfit," Ned said, "And that sure is news to me."

The old man's gray eyes flickered. "I'm not superstitious, and I mind my own business. You can't help having trouble with the Telegraph—or they with you. It's in the land, like a battlefield. You never can wash out the blood."

"Suppose you tell me what this feud is about?" Ned suggested.

"It's not my feud," he said. "I'll let Anne Tuck tell you about it. Heard she was in town today; I'll see if I can find her."

"Thanks," Ned said; "I'll appreciate that. I'll want a room for tonight—and I'll stay for supper."

The old man rang his punch bell and a boy hurried up officiously. "Mr. Haley is having supper," Eams said.

"Yes, sir!" The boy nodded and led Ned away, across the crowded lobby, into the big dining room where tables gleamed with white cloths and polished silver. Overhead gas lights glittered on a crystal chandelier. This was very elegant, yet somehow it reminded Ned of a mountain lion who kept his sharp claws and sudden death hidden under an appearance of softness.

When the boy pulled out a chair at a table in the corner, Ned sat and waited for the waiter to bring him some bourbon. It was good whisky, probably the best in the hotel, and he wondered why he should be treated so well. A half hour passed before anyone came up to his table. There was a sudden quieting, a holding of breath in the big room, and he lifted his eyes to watch the girl who was searching

for him. She was tall, disturbingly beautiful, Junoesque. She moved across the room quickly when she caught his eye.

"Good evening, Mr. Haley," she said. "I'm your neighbor—Anne Tuck."

The girl refused the whisky he offered her. Laughing, she showed white teeth and a pink mouth that was more heady than any French liquor. "No need for me to drink," she said. "I have three brothers who take care of that department for me."

She sat across from him, her deep blue eyes very intent. Though simply dressed in a grayish blue frock she could not have been more glamorous in an off-shoulder evening gown. She seemed completely self-possessed, and at the same time a little afraid of something.

Ned asked: "Your three brothers take care of the feuding department, too?"

The blue eyes darkened with terror for a moment, then the generous mouth formed itself into a smile. With a strong, blunt finger she marked an "X" on the table cloth.

"That feud is water over the dam; it's dead. It doesn't exist any more. It's crossed off." She made another "X" and said: "Maybe I'll change my mind about that drink. With the war all over in the valley we might have some champagne to celebrate?"

"Of course—!" Ned signalled the boy. You can't just X out a feud like that. He said softly: "Now that the feuding is over, what was it all about?'

The girl's eyes flashed angrily. "You stole a big chunk of our range—the best grassland we had," she said; "that's what the feud's about. What did you think caused it?"

NED HADN'T stolen anything as far as he knew. The papers, the deed and all had been in perfect shape. The lawyer had not even mentioned this land trouble with his neighbor.

"That's sure interesting," Ned admitted. "And it's news, too. How'd I get away with all this land? Did I take it with a shovel and wheelbarrow—or did I law it out of you?".

The girl tapped on the table. She was a thundercloud ready to let go with some lightning. Her vitality charged Ned, too, there was so much of it. He felt the sparks playing around him like wild fire. "I told you that feud is dead!" she said angrily. Then with a small smile she suggested, "Can't we talk of something more pleasant?"

The waiter, who had arrived with the champagne, stood nervously near by on one leg with the battered bucket beside him. When he poured the drinks, some of the sparkling wine spilled on the table cloth. Ned could just about read the man's mind. With members of feuding ranches at the same table, anything might happen. But Ned smiled across the table at the girl.

"When I went to Aggie we elected some girl or other as the one we'd most like to be wrecked with on a desert island. I forgot who she was or how it came up," he told Anne Tuck. "But if we had to elect a girl we'd most like not to have a feud with, I'd vote for you."

Lifting his glass, he tinkled it against hers. He did not like champagne, even good champagne, and this was definitely poor. He did not like girls, either, especially girls you had to fight with. The honkeytonk girls were okay—you could always figure them out. You knew just how far you could trust them. But these other girls—the good girls like Anne Tuck—were just plain treacherous—accusing him of

stealing her land and then refusing to discuss it with him.

She watched him with great, blue eyes and a sort of air of calculation. "It would be best if you didn't see me any more," she said abruptly, "and if you kept on your own side of the river. Thanks for the champagne." She stood up so abruptly her chair tumbled over and the waiter came running to set it up again. "And watch out for my brothers."

She walked away regally as if nothing untoward had happened, and went out of the dining room with the dignity of a queen. Or, it occurred to Ned, with the assurance of one who is in command of the firing squad.

He lit up a cigarette.

AFTER DINNER, Ned played a couple of indifferent games of billiards and sat in for an hour or so of poker with some of the local gentry. Everyone was very polite to him, and a little distant, as if they were afraid he might have the measles or some other minor disease; finally he wandered out into the town, down the length of boardwalk until it gave way to the dusty path, and back into town again. The streets were crowded. Choir practice was being held in the Church and Ned was quick to hear that his fine baritone was needed. When he had gotten settled he reckoned he would come in and join the outfit. He liked to sing; and hymns were specially satisfying. But tonight he was on the prowl for something else. Like a train on a track with no choice of curve to take, he found himself in the *Crystal Palace.*

The show was bright and amusing, the girls kicking their legs to satisfactory heights or singing saucy songs. Nobody paid any attention to the comedians. The bar was packed, but somehow Ned found a small table and was immediately joined by a percentage girl.

"Sit down, Gorgeous," he invited, "and tell me all about yourself."

She settled in the chair with a graceful gesture and gave him all the details of her battle with the world; how she had slaved in a hashhouse to put her brother through college—how much of an ingrate he turned out to be. She had suffered, all right, and though Ned had heard the same story from other girls he gave her all his sympathy.

"They got private booths up in the balcony," she told him.

"So I heard!" Ned nodded. She was a pretty girl in her own way, not yet hardened to the life, and might well furnish pleasant company for the evening. But he asked her abruptly: "You know the Tuck boys?"

The girl's eyes glazed: "We ain't allowed to talk."

"Forget it," Ned said. Men's tongues often wagged late at night in these honkeytonks, and the girls seldom forgot what they heard. Ned took a ten dollar bill from his pocket and slipped it across the tavern table under a tin plate. "Tuck that in your stocking, Susie!"

"I'll be fired if I tell you," she said sullenly. "And if the *Crystal* fires me there's no place else in Wyoming that'll take me."

"There's forty-four other states," Ned said.

She said quickly: "They'll run you out of the valley just like they run everybody else out; they'll kill you if they have to. A certain man who comes to visit me told me all about it."

"Who?"

She got up and left in such a hurry some of the men there stared suspiciously at Ned. He pondered this queer enmity that had no more body than a will-o'-the-wisp. While waiting for another drink a new girl came over and sat down abruptly at his table. She was shivering violently and it was no surprise to Ned, who wondered how these girls kept from catching pneumonia they wore so few clothes.

"Friend of yours outside." Her teeth chattered.

He realized suddenly that it was terror, not cold, that was bothering her.

"Tell him to come in," Ned suggested.

"He can't!" The girl grinned like a Hallowe'en pumpkin. "He's dead."

"Good lord!" Ned cried.

The girl said: "It's that Frenchie who works for you; somebody shot him. One of the Tuck boys brought him to town."

Ned came up from the table like a drowning man struggling for his last breath. Jerry Marquette? Jerry could not be dead....

2

NED FOUND a priest to bury Jerry Marquette. Anne Tuck came to the funeral and caught up with Ned on his way down from Boothill. Timidly she touched Ned's arm. "I'm sorry," she said.

Ned said. "I never knew my ma or pa. Jerry took care of me when I ran away from the orphanage."

Her eyes clouded. She bit her lower lip and seemed about to say something else when Ned turned his back and walked away. He did not intend to be rude; he just could not talk about Jerry to Anne or to anybody else. He got a bottle of whisky at the Eagle Hotel and took it up to his room but could not get interested in the stuff. His brain was numbed. Last night when the girl reported that Jerry was dead, he simply had not been able to believe it. Jerry had never hurt anybody or anything. Yet he had been shot in the back of his head by a high-powered rifle. The only clue was that he had been killed on the Telegraph outfit's side of the river. But what he had been doing there nobody knew—not even the Tuck boy who had found him there.

Ned could not stand the small hotel room, nor could he go out to the ranch yet and face Jose who, presumably, did know about Jerry. He took a very stiff drink from his bottle and went downstairs. Phil Eams tended to his business at the desk as Ned passed through the lobby. Ned turned east on the plank walk, then entered a door several stores down and climbed a flight of stairs to the second story offices of the block. A young lady wrote busily in an account book in a small anteroom through which Ned had to pass. He touched his hat to her. "Evening, Miss Anderson."

The girl put down her pen; she had become a sudden scarlet, even to her ears under the pale hair. "The boss is expecting you," she said.

Under the curcumstances, Ned thought that a rather curious remark. He had never especially noticed this girl before. Now, almost automatically, he took a second look at her. She wore a peek-a-boo white waist with a deep "V" exposing soft flesh that was almost as pink as her face. She averted her eyes, and when he noticed the straight, short line of her nose he thought she was rather pretty for a town girl. He wondered why she was blushing—not that it mattered.

Van Deutra spoke up from the inner office. His voice rumbled like a whisky keg on a board floor. "Come on in. I couldn't get to the funeral—but I know how much Jerry meant to you."

Nobody knows that, Ned thought, *least of all this lawyer and trader in cattle and land.* Van Deutra pushed out a chair .for Ned, but Ned remained standing. Leaning back in his swivel chair the lawyer propped his feet on the desk.

"How come you were expecting me?" Ned asked.

VAN DEUTRA was a heavy man, like his voice. A rather droopy mustache gave him a permanent look of unhappiness. A half-dozen lucky charms dangled from his heavy gold watch-chain. His vest was of fancy

brocade, his coat of black broadcloth. He picked at his teeth with a gold toothpick; it was a habit, not a necessity.

"Sooner or later everything fliters down to me," Van Deutra said in his ominous rumble. "Then I put two and two together and wait for the expected results."

Ned did not follow him. "So?" He lifted an eyebrow.

"You bought champagne for Anne Tuck last night," the lawyer said. "She told you about the silly feud the Tucks are keeping hot. Your man was murdered on Tuck land. Eventually you would come to your lawyer to talk about it. Simple, ain't it, Ned?"

"Not so simple as that," Ned said. "I bought the ranch through you, mister, and I came up today to ask how come I never heard about that feud until last night."

Van Deutra shrugged his heavy shoulders. "Maybe you're a man who doesn't keep his ears open; maybe that's how come you never heard of the feud."

Ned's voice crackled as he struggled to hold his anger in check. "Why didn't you tell me before I bought?"

"Didn't think of it, to tell the truth," Van Deutra insisted. "The feud's silly. It's past and gone; don't mean anything. So why dig it up?"

Ned's feet were solid on that frayed rug. He felt the girl watching him, silently. He did not answer the lawyer directly, but just stared at the man until Van Deutra's eyes wavered. "I didn't dig up the feud," Ned said slowly; "it was dug up for me. Now tell me about it?"

His voice was cold, expressionless, but absolutely relentless. Van Deutra chewed on his cigar and removed his polished boots from the desk top. "It goes back a long time," he said. "A couple of partners split the valley between themselves; the river was their dividing line. There was a storm one night and the river shifted, cutting off a big chunk of the Tuck land. That

land was legally awarded the other feller, as an 'Act of God.' That's when Tuck began to claim the river was shifted with blasting powder—that was the present Tucks' father..."

"What happened on the other side of the river?"

"Killed—run out—boogered. Nobody's been able to hold it since." Van Deutra shrugged his beefy shoulders. "You looked like a gent with enough sand to fight back those hooligans—but if you ain't got it, I'll find somebody to take the place from you."

Fair enough on the surface, but the poison was hidden like the Micky Finn in a drink, Ned thought. He could sell only at a loss, and he began to suspect that Van Deutra had sucked him in to do exactly that. "I don't scare," he said, and walked out. Passing Miss Anderson, he smiled. "Be seeing you, honey!" This time he reckoned she blushed clear to her heels.

●

THE TUCK boys often hung around the livery stable. Ned found only one of them down there, and he could not be sure which it was because they all looked alike to him. All three were big, hulking and dark. When they did not travel together in a solid group you always had the feeling that the others were not far away. Yet this one seemed to be alone with his sister in the barn where he

was saddling her horse for her. He glared at Ned from under heavy brows. His eyes were a startling blue, a pure, innocent baby blue.

Ned said: "I suppose I'm expected to drag my gun and shoot you, mister. But I'm not going to—not right yet."

Tuck blinked. His sister stood there beside him and kept quiet.

"Why?" her brother asked.

"There's two whys," Ned said. "You know why I'm supposed to shoot you—because somebody killed Jerry on your range and the killer is more than likely one of your boys." He hitched up his pants, a gesture calculated to draw attention to the fact that he was not wearing either a gunbelt or a sixshooter. "And I'd be a fool to drag an iron on you even if I did have one—because you've got two brothers hidden in the hayloft."

This member of the Tuck family was not so crafty as he thought himself; those baby-blue eyes gave him away. One of his brothers was in a box stall across the wide barn and the other was in the hayloft where he could cover anybody coming in through the big doors.

"We don't want no trouble," Tuck said finally. "You stay on your side of the river and we'll stay on ours."

It was a threat, thinly veiled, and reminiscent of a similar threat his sister had made the evening before. Ned answered it loudly enough so all the Tucks could hear. "That might have been a good rule yesterday—but it's no good today," he said. "I can't find Jerry's killer on my side of the river—and I aim to find him no matter where he is."

The Tuck brother shifted his feet. His baby-blue eyes gazed innocently from his rugged countenance and seemed a little hurt. He would have felt much better if one of his brothers was doing the talking for him. He had been planted here because he was the fastest with a sixshooter. The other boys were quicker with their tongues than he.

"I said all I got to say," he said finally. "Don't set foot on Telegraph range—"

"For goodness sake," the sister cut in with sudden explosiveness. "If you'd just quit this dog-fighting and get together maybe you could find out who shot Mr. Marquette. But no—you all keep on acting up like—like—"

She could not find a fitting comparison in her anger. Steamed up, Ned throught she was prettier than ever—not at all like that town girl in the lawyer's office. Her shoulders were square and the color of her cheeks was tinted windburn from the open range. Dressed in a split-skirt riding habit, she was taller than the night before, deeper in the bosom and slimmer in the hips.

"If you could only cooperate!" she got out.

This did not appeal to her brother, but it struck a chord in Ned Haley. He lifted his hat and bowed slightly. "Miss Tuck—" he said slowly—"it would please me very much to cooperate with you."

"Now—look—" her brother put in.

Anne and Ned both ignored him now, and Ned found himself somehow trapped by the deep color of her eyes as she stared into his. "That will be a start," she said, licking her lips. "I'll ride out with you now, Mr. Haley, to the spot where your man's body was found. We can go on from there.

NED HAD to stop a moment at the Eagle Hotel to pay his bill and pick up his doofunnies. He had hoped to run into Phil Eams there, but the manager was not in the lobby and Ned wanted his meeting to appear completely casual. Outside the sun was bright in his face. Anne Tuck looked very beautiful up on her fine horse; and across the street Miss Anderson appeared to be window shopping, though Ned was pretty sure she had been sent down by her boss to keep an eye on him. Back in the shadows of the livery stable's doorway

three big, dark young men lurked while trying to appear as inconspicuous as possible. Throwing the saddle-bags aboard his horse, Ned tied them down. The deputy sheriff had arrived on the scene and sauntered down-street to accost Ned.

"I'd leave this little matter in the hands of the law," the deputy suggested. "We been here a long time; we know our people and our land."

The officer was lean as a beanpole, with a long, stringy mustache and eyes the color of rainwater in a leaky barrel. Ned instantly disliked him. He lifted himself into the saddle with slow contemptuousness. "Killing Jerry Marquette is hardly a *little matter*," he said bitterly. "And it don't seem to me that the law has been very effective in the past." He touched his hat to Anne Tuck. "Ready, Miss Tuck?"

"Ready?" she said, and immediately put spurs to her horse to canter out of town.

They did not talk at first, but hit for the trail on the Telegraph side of the river. The girl was a superb rider, Ned noticed, completely attuned to her mount and alert to everything going on about her. This country, he thought, was not the sort that should breed feuds. The willows and cottonwoods along the river and the many creeks flowing down from the hills were old and serene. Up along the lower slopes of the mountains the hardwood groves would be alive with game, and higher yet were the great stands of pine for lumber. Water and grass in great abundance did not go with fingers that lay uneasy on bushwhack triggers; feud country was usually hungry country—not fat country.

The girl rode wide of the Telegraph headquarters so he had only a glimpse of a huddle of gray buildings and corrals. Then she stopped when the river took a sudden turn to the east, and he realized that he had never in his life been in a more perfect spot for bushwhacking. Here was a shallow ford where the river had cut a scythe-like curve into a high, crumbling bank. Half a dozen men could hide out in the brush while keeping an outlook on that ford. The girl halted some feet away from the water though her horse strained for a drink.

"Mr. Marquette was found over there, half in the water," she said. "You saw him in town; he was shot in the back of the head." She had become very pale and hung onto the saddle horn with both hands. "You have to get this into your head, Mr. Haley—my brothers did not do it."

"Of course!" Ned was bitter. "Your brothers wouldn't do such a thing! They wouldn't hide in the hayloft down at the livery stable, either, while another tried to pick a fight with a neighbor."

The girl bit her lower lip but the color did not return. "This valley is damned," she said with sudden heat. "There's a curse on it!"

Ned stepped down, gave the girl his horse's reins to hold, and walked back and forth over the beach where Jerry Marquette had been found. He could discover nothing new here. Many cattle had been down to drink, or had been driven across the beach to cover any evidence. Ned swung back into the saddle.

"What was Jerry doing here?" he asked the girl.

"I don't know!" she said. "All I know is he was lured here and killed —and you're supposed to blame us for the killing. You do, don't you?"

Of course he blamed the Telegraph. Who else could have any reason for killing Jerry? It was the old familiar game, and Van Deutra had hinted at it. Bedevil your neighbor, scare him to death, and buy his place at a cheap price. Then sell it to somebody new and go through the process all over again to make a neat though bloody profit on each transaction. This game had been played before and had worked.

Ned asked: "What's the Telegraph ready to offer me for the Haystack and a promise to clear out without investigating the killing of Jerry Marquette?"

The girl's lovely face clouded. "Even if we wanted your withered old grass we couldn't put up a nickel for it. We're mortgaged to the ears; up to the tops of our ears."

"Oh?" he said in surprise.

Her lips curled in scorn. "The Haystack seems to breed rustlers or cowards," she said. "Van Deutra told me he thought you'd be an exception."

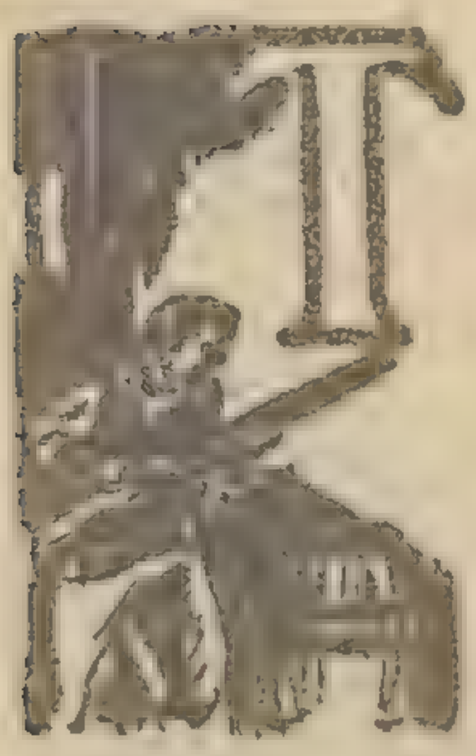
"What made him think that?"

"I don't know," she said, "but it's obvious he was wrong. Even I thought you'd have guts enough to stick around a while instead of offering to sell out at the first sign of trouble."

She reined her horse about, slapped him sharply with the crop, and left Ned alone there at the ford. Anne Tuck was a girl full of beans, Ned mused, and he liked beans. Too bad he did not like girls.

With the faintest of smiles he urged his horse into the river, not knowing if she had led him into a trap or not....

3



THE RIVER bottom was shifty and the current fast. Storms in the hills had raised the river's level and roiled up the water. When Ned reached his own side of the river the short hairs at the base of his skull were lifted by a persistent tingling; once on dry land he went right on into the trees and out of sight.

There, reaction hit him. He shuddered mightily and climbed down from the saddle to breathe deeply and stretch out the tautness of his frayed nerves. Carefully he crept back to the river's edge to study the high bluff on the Telegraph side. Though he could see nothing suspicious there he had the feeling that somebody besides Anne Tuck had watched him at the ford, and he made a mental note to return to this place soon to thoroughly scout it.

But this was hardly the day for it, so he brought his horse out of the trees to ride at a fast trot across his own range. He dropped down into a slough where his sleek Texas cattle had gathered in the heat of the day and there it struck him that he must be in the old river bed, the one-time dividing line between the two ranches that the so-called "Act of God" had shifted.

Following up this discovery, he headed north until the old river bed turned to a dry wash and eventually emerged in a shallow cut in a high bank where the river, itself, broke into view again. Here the water ran swiftly through a narrow cut and he could see just how it had jumped the bank that stormy night many years ago to form a new course for itself. Thousands of acres had been cut off from the Telegraph and given to the Haystack—acres enough to make anyone feel like fighting.

Troubled, bemused, Ned finally turned for home late in the afternoon. He rode down into the sheltered hollow where the refurbished headquarters of the Haystack was located, and there detected the faintest aroma of stew on the fire, one of those stews slightly spiced in a Mexican manner by Jose, the peer of the cooks.

The original Haystack buildings and corrals had been burned to the foundations so Jose was still cooking out of the chuckwagon. Ned was living in a tent. They had not even cut the pine poles for the house, but this was home just the same and Ned rode into it feeling mighty blue.

Jose greeted him with a white-toothed grin and a wave of the stew spoon. "I guess you have ver' good time in town," he chided the boss, "that you get so dronk and Jerry mus' come to you."

"Guess I did," Ned said dubiously.

This was the tough part of it, the necessity to tell Jose what had happened. His throat stuck. Jose's sly, black eyes gleamed.

"Now, Jerry, he dronk, too?" he asked.

"Dish me up a plate of that stew," Ned said. His voice sounded unnatural to himself. "I'm going to wash up. Jerry—he isn't—well—he won't be home tonight."

HE HAD given himself away; there was a sudden stricken look in Jose's black eyes and Ned had to turn away. Splashing cold water on his neck did not help at all. He brought from his saddle bags the whisky bottle that he had been unable to drain while in the hotel and poured a couple of good-sized drinks. Jose took his broodingly. Ned put down his drink in one quick gulp.

"Who told Jerry I was drunk?" he asked abruptly.

"Some hombre," Jose said. "I didn't see him. Jerry says he got to go to the Telegraph place. You get dronk in town and go out to call on the lady Anne."

Ned could not face his little friend. "You not there?" Jose asked in his soft, musical voice.

"It was an ambush," Ned said. "They killed him; he's dead. He never hurt anybody and they shot him in the back of the head."

"Who does this?"

Ned did not know. Jose moved about his chores in a mechanical fashion. Ned was hardly certain that the other had spoken again. "Who find him?"

"Harry Tuck brought him in," Ned said, and immediately wished he had not spoken. You could not exactly place it, but something in Jose's expression told Ned that the little cook would try to kill Harry Tuck. It was inevitable as the coming of tomorrow. "Harry didn't know anything about it," Ned said. "He just found Jerry, that's all."

Jose had no answer for him.

IT IS STRANGE how your best friend can be dead and buried, and yet seem to be with you still. This night was dark with the promise of rain, and though there were only two men hunkered down beside the campfire silently smoking their cigarettes it seemed that Jerry must ride in at any moment. Jerry had always liked plinking his beat-up guitar and singing French songs in his own dialect. When the gloom was on the others, Jerry would always try to cheer them up. But Jerry was not here tonight, nor would he ever be here again, yet Ned still found himself waiting, listening to the woods sounds, thinking that the funeral must have been only a nightmare.

Scattered drops of rain rattled on the canvas roof of Ned's tent. He was a man who had always liked rain; he enjoyed the soothing sound of it, and the dampness of it, and the things that rain did to growing things. But sometimes like tonight when he was listening for he-did-not-know-what the rain was an annoyance. It muted the scream of the mountain lion away off yonder somewhere—and he might never have heard the trotting horse if he had not felt the vibration first in the ground.

Stopping only to reach for his six-shooter he ducked out of the tent and into the brush. He could hear the horse more plainly now, approaching cautiously from town, and he went down-trail to intercept it. Then a gust of rain took all sounds away for a

moment and left Ned drenched, watchful, waiting. He was startled by the sudden appearance of the rider limned against the dark sky. "Late for visiting," he said coldly. "And don't forget I can see you but you can't see me!"

A quick, inarticulate cry, and the horse reared; almost upsetting the rider, who grabbed for the horn. Though the pale blot that a was face could not be recognized, Ned knew that his visitor was a girl. "Who's with you?" he asked.

"Nobody," she cried. "I came alone. I'm looking for Mr. Haley."

He knew her now, Miss Anderson, the typist in Van Deutra's office who blushed so brightly. "At your service," he said.

She spoke in a breathless hurry. "I'm afraid. I don't think they followed me, but I don't know. Where can we go?"

"We're already there," Ned said.

He lifted his hands to help her, and when she swung a leg over the cantle she became entangled somehow and fell against him. If this was an accident, or deliberate, he could not guess; but in reaching for support her arms wound around his neck and the whole length of her subtle, soft body was flung up against him. Even with the cold, wet rain trickling down his neck and soaking them both he could sense the absolute femininity of the girl, and when her lips brushed against his, as if by accident, too, it was a quick, hot flame.

She drew away, struggling for balance and laughing. "Why—Mr. Haley, I believe you would try to take advantage of a girl," she cried. "You've never looked at me before—but you tried to kiss me!"

She knew very well that he had not tried to do any such thing, and it sent him to wondering what she was up to. "I'm always the perfect gentleman, Miss Anderson," he grinned.

The girl stiffened a moment, then hesitated in his arms and finally let her weight flow against him again from thigh to breast. With her head thrown back she was altogether lovely. Rain on her face made her skin bright, and there was a flash of distant light on her white teeth. Her inviting mouth and warm body nearly overwhelmed him. She had stopped smiling.

She said: "I liked it."

A bold girl who had blushed strangely and looked at him oddly when he dropped in to visit her boss; yet she had come a long way on an extremely mean night just for a kiss, he thought. He could feel the muffled beat of her heart against his ribs. "I liked it, too," he said, "but one's enough. You wanted me for something?"

Disappointed, the girl moved away. The wide brim of her hat hid her eyes as her tongue licked at her ripe lips. "Van Deutra's going to pull a trap on you!"

"Deutra's your boss!" He was suddenly caustic. "And I'm a stranger. Yet you come out in weather like this to tell me to look out for him."

"But—" she cried. "Don't you understand?" Her face was white again in the drizzling night. "I—I had to come."

Her arms were around his neck in an instant, and she flung herself up against him. This time there was no doubt about the kiss—no accident. Her mouth pressed against his, fluttering softly, then became hard and urgent as she thrust her body up to his. He held her lightly until she finally loosened her grip.

"I'll take you home," he said.

The girl was crying, but he did not know it until they were both hunkered down beside his little fire to dry themselves out. He had never had a girl bawl over him before. It made him very uncomfortable. He glanced over toward the chuckwagon wondering how Jose was taking this unconventional visit. But Jose was not taking it in at all.

His blankets were empty!.

NED WAS almost as angry with himself as he was with Miss Anderson; and both angers, he knew, were unreasonable. He blamed her for telling him off so Jose could sneak out undetected; but of course she could not have known anything about the little Mexican's determination to avenge the death of his friend —and he blamed himself, too, though Jose would undoubtedly have sneaked off as soon as he got the chance, anyway.

Catching his horse in the rain was not easy, and saddling him up in the flickering lantern light under the shelter of a tarpaulin stretched between four trees was an unpleasant chore. He double-checked his carbine and sixshooter and brought out fresh, greasy bullets for each. When he was ready to go he discovered that the girl had washed her tears away somehow and was smiling tremulously. For an instant there in the poor light she looked very beautiful. "I made a fool of myself," she said.

"We're all fools," he told her. "Part fools, anyway. But you've finished being a fool for tonight. I'll unsaddle your horse. You can climb into my tent and sleep until morning. I've got a little night riding to do."

"Oh!" her eyes widened. "I thought you were taking me home."

"I've had a change in plans," he said; 'I'll take you home tomorrow."

Already he was late, maybe too late to stop Jose. But when he moved to take off the saddle Miss Anderson lithely shoved her body between horse and the man. One thing that Ned learned rapidly that night was the power of a woman, even a small one. Pity the man, he thought, who gets himself throwed and hogtied by a female. As Ned—he'd have none of it!

"I dealt myself into this game," Miss Anderson said. "And I'm sticking to it—to the last chip."

There was a determination in the girl that could not be denied. To go out in the night with him, through the rain and across the river against almost certain gunfire, would not stop her, though she had not seemed to be that kind of girl. He had thought of her as the soft town type who'd be scared of the dark; a silly girl who blushed furiously in the presence of strange men.

"My cook—Jose—is gun-hunting Harry Tuck," Ned tried to argue with her. "Somebody'll be hurt before morning; it might be you."

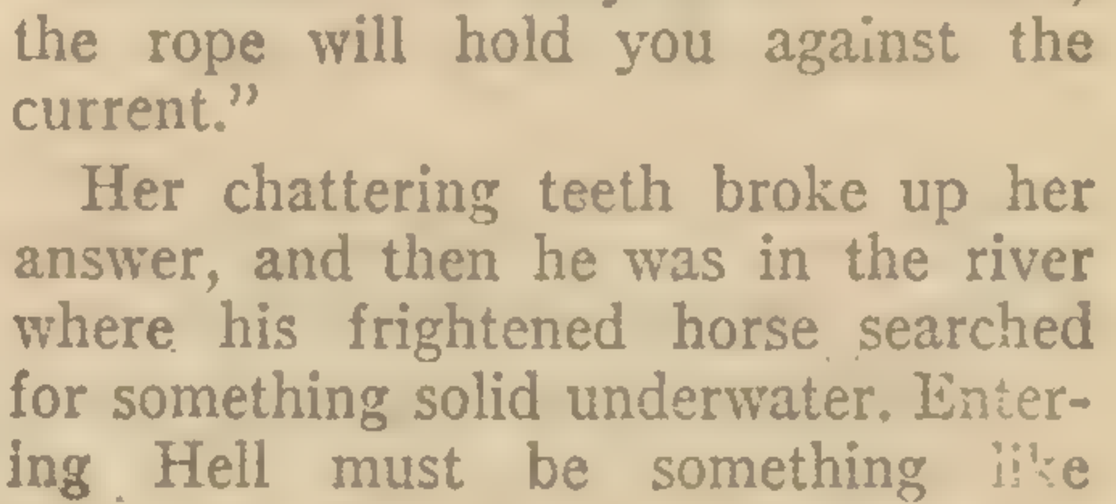
"I'm not afraid," she said.

"Then—let's go!"

They rode slowly into a night that seemed darker than ever after the brief period of lantern-light. The slash of rain on his face was Ned's only guide as he plunged into the gloom with the stubborn girl close beside him. When he pulled up at the edge of the river that glistened like hammered steel in the night he wondered if they could possibly get across. The water level had risen considerably since he forded the stream earlier that day. It boiled along like an angry snake in the storm.

Slipping a loop around the girl's waist, Ned tied the other end of the lariat to the horn of his saddle. "If your horse loses his footing, just slide out of the kak," he told her. "Hoist your dress as high as you can." He could sense her blushes. "You'll be able to walk that way on the bottom; the rope will hold you against the current."

Her chattering teeth broke up her answer, and then he was in the river where his frightened horse searched for something solid underwater. Entering Hell must be something like this, Ned thought, though you were



not likely to have a pretty girl with you on that occasion. His horse slipped to his knees and had to be hauled up again. Through it all the girl never once whimpered, but kept so close to Ned most of the way their thighs made nearly constant contact. When they climbed up the Telegraph outfit's bank his boots were full of water, and the girl's heavy riding habit was so loaded with the stuff she was practically anchored to the saddle.

Though a cigarette was what he mostly wanted now he did not feel that he could stop to build and light one. So, as fast as they dared trot their horses, they coursed on across the black grassland until they picked up the guiding lights of the Telegraph headquarters. Ned thought that the numbing chill of his spine could never be driven away.

"I'll scout the place—ride clear around it," he shuddered. "Then we'll go in. I don't think Jose's got here yet. It doesn't look like anything's happened."

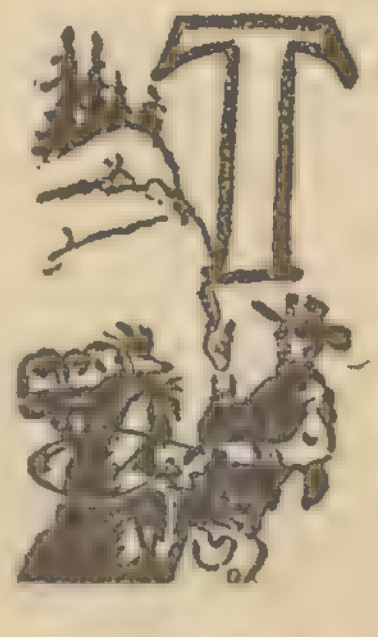
She nodded. A finger touched his cheek and he started out alone. The bunkhouse where the Tuck brothers preferred to sleep had been blanked out. A drift of woodsmoke came from the house which was brightly lighted as if awaiting a party. When he found Miss Anderson again in the night, Ned was pretty sure that Jose had not come by here.

Quite boldly they rode up to the house, making a fine sound of hoofbeats and creaking leather. Ned wanted no one to think that this was a sneak attack. With the girl beside him he climbed the porch steps. His big fist banged on the door that suddenly swung open.

Anne Tuck seemed to be alone, dressed in some sort of frilly rig that looked like a nightgown to Ned. He put a hand to his hat to lift it. "Miss Tuck—" he said.

There was a surprised lift to her eyebrows as she recognized him and his companion, and then, clutching the gown about her throat, Anne stepped back to let them enter. As she did so a rifle slammed its bitter bark across the ranchyard—once—twice. The first shot hummed clear across the wide room to smash into a picture hanging on the far wall; the second hit Ned with the impact of an axe, spinning him around to tumble him over onto his face on the floor. Both girls screamed—and Anne Tuck kicked the door closed....

14



THE AMBUSHER failed to follow through. While Miss Anderson stood guard by the front door with a cocked shotgun, Anne washed out Ned's wound. The bullet had plowed through the heavy gunbelt that he wore buckled under his slicker and had cut on through his levis to gouge out a hunk of flesh near his thighbone. Mostly it had stunned him, leaving him more bruised than wounded though there was plenty of blood in his drawers when he peeled down to bare meat, and the gash on his leg was ugly-looking and mean.

He clenched his teeth while Anne worked over him, and afterwards borrowed some clean underwear that belonged to one of her brothers. He made a joke about it. "Anybody kick your brother in the pants—I'll be the one who'll feel it."

Rather grimly, Anne said: "It always is that way. Having the river change its course was a kick in the pants for us—but it never did the Haystack outfit any good—and if it changes back tonight it would only bring more trouble."

The rain was really slatting down now, rattling like buckshot against the windows that groaned and whined behind drawn blinds. In the Tuck living room the man and two girls

seemed to draw closer together for mutual protection against the violence of the storm and unknown killer who might now be creeping around for another try at Ned Haley.

Ned felt as if his leg was weighted with lead when he finally stood up again. The pain was approaching the unendurable. He dragged himself toward the hatrack where his wet slicker and Stetson still dripped morosely. Miss Anderson blocked him with the shotgun, holding it flat against him, not pointing at him. "Please—don't go out—again!" she begged.

Ned said simply: "I've got to find out who tried to kill me." Silently the girls stared at him. He had begun to wonder about them. Were they friends or enemies, or just plain acquaintances? They gave him no clue. "I'm kind of curious," he said to Anne Tuck, "as to which one of your brothers it was."

The girl wheeled about, backing up to the fireplace and pressing her shoulderblades against the mantel. She was a gorgeous girl in her anger, though quite different from Miss Anderson. Anne was darkly vivid—and tough as a Telegraph longhorn. "I can give you your answer," she said. To taunt him, she did not do so immediately. "It was a little, short man with a dark mustache. He came by here half an hour ago looking for Harry; he must have made a little mistake in identification."

"Jose!" He cried. The ambush had driven all thoughts of the little Mexican out of his head. "No— not Jose—he wouldn't bushwhack anybody."

"Anybody but you," Anne said. "Whoever he is."

The enormity of the situation appalled him. He shook his head, unable to believe it could be true.

"Jose is one of my men," he said. "He thought your brother killed Jerry Marquette; we were aiming to bring him home before he got into trouble."

"It was a good try," Anne said. She laughed. "Now I got to bawl because he shot the wrong man."

"Thanks," Ned said. "Thanks very much."

He reached over the head of the girl who had blocked him and took the hat and slicker from the rack. Then, painfully, he dragged his way to the kitchen, hunched his shoulders against the storm, and slipped out through the back door.

HE SLITHERED and stumbled across the teeming door yard until he thought his wounded leg would burn off at the hip. The gunman had been shooting from a wagon shed that was not too hard to find. The drum of rain on the shake roof drowned out any sound from inside as Ned edged around the corner, out of the rain, to stand there a long minute waiting for something to happen. The click of his gun as he cocked it sounded surprisingly loud to him.

Still nothing happened. "Jose—Jose!" No answer. Endless time passed. Ned found dry hay which he threw down just within the drip line of the open front of the shed. Then he hunkered close to the ground and threw a lighted match. As the hay blazed up he could see everything clearly. A damp spot showed where a horse had stood dripping wet for quite a while, and the hoofmarks showed that he had taken off only a few minutes ago under full power. The sound of the rain, apparently, had kept Ned from hearing the escape of the would-be assassin.

There was a man's footprints, too, and though Ned searched carefully for cartridge cases he could find none. Whoever had tried to shoot him had been careful to pick up his empties so they could not give him away.

Shoving the burning hay into the rain, Ned limped back to the house. Inside, he had the feeling that the girls had been talking about him while he was gone and that something secret had passed between them. He made nothing of it, though, because as far as he was concerned women were odd critters of a race not quite human and

definitely not understandable to men. Anne brought him a steaming hot toddy and he told them what he had found in the shed.

"It wasn't Jose," he said; "Jose's boots are run over at the heels and this hombre's were new." He turned to Anne. "Seems like I remember your big brother in town today had on new boots."

"The only new pair in the county, undoubtedly," Anne said sarcastically.

"Could be," he said.

But he remembered having seen another pair of new boots today somewhere, and he tried to make a picture of them. On a counter, maybe—or—no—on a desk! His eyes shifted to Miss Anderson whose expression had suddenly laced with fear. Van Deutra's brand new boots had been propped up on his desk when Ned dropped in on him that morning....

●

THE GIRLS would not stay at the Telegraph after Ned announced his determination to go to town tonight. Each had her own excuse. Anne Tuck claimed she was going to look up her brothers to warn them that Jose was on the prowl. Miss Anderson did not reckon on staying out here alone. And Ned, himself, pretended that he was heading for town only to see a sawbones about his wound. This might be a perfect night for feuding, he admitted, but not for an hombre lamed up like he was.

So the three of them plunged into the rain, this time with the wind and storm at their backs and their horses hurrying through the tempest because they sensed shelter and feed ahead of them. Though he was practically sightless, Ned noticed that the cattle had drifted into the hollows or the lee of groves of trees. When the gusty rain let up for a moment he could hear the roar of the river and the rising keen of the wind. Long before they reached town Ned began looking forward to shelter even if he could enjoy it for only a few minutes.

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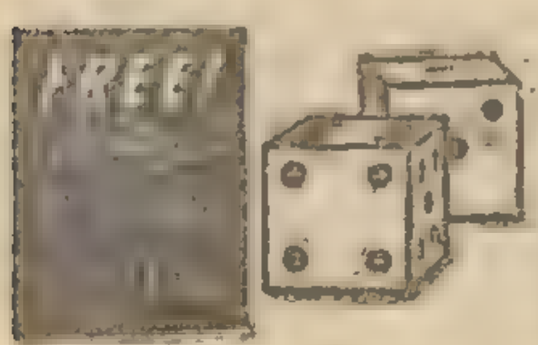

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DOUBLE ACTION WESTERN

At the edge of town Miss Anderson surreptitiously took Ned's hand for a moment and squeezed it convulsively. She was an odd one, that girl, blushing, bumping against him and kissing him. She was quite a contrast to Anne Tuck of the sharp tongue. She left suddenly after making him promise to stay in the hotel that night, a promise he had no intention of keeping—and when he parted from Anne, too, in front of the doctor's house, he felt peculiarly bereft as he watched her vanish in the night.

The doctor was out on a call so Ned limped on down to the hotel and was pleased to find Phil Eams at the desk. "Got a problem for you to work on," he said, "but I feel like I was coming down with pneumonia and need a drink first. How about joining me?"

"Always glad to," the hotel man said. "Pick out a table."

Ned sat in the corner where he had so briefly entertained Anne the day before. The bar was crowded tonight, and the dining room tables had been cleared of cloths for the more serious poker players. After a while Phil shuffled over in his carpet slippers to join Ned in a couple of drinks with plenty of rum and lemon juice. Ned pitched into his story, talking so low nobody could listen in.

"You know just about everything that's going on around town, Mr. Eams," he said. "Now—" He told how Jose had gone on the prowl, and how he had gone over to the Telegraph to bring Jose home. "Got shot when Miss Tuck opened the front door. But it wasn't Jose; if it was one of the Tuck boys, why didn't he follow it up. And who was he looking for, anyway?"

The hotel man's glance shifted around the room. "You're asking me to make a guess, and that's something I never do. The Tuck boys were in here just a couple of minutes ago. They've been out riding a lot tonight; you might find them down to the *Palace*." Then he gave out a piece of free advice. "Maybe they want

witnesses when they kill you; maybe they aim to rile you up enough to make you start shooting. Then they'll cut you down."

A cold shudder scooted up Ned's spine. He drained his drink. Eams seemed suddenly angry. "Something you don't seem to know," he said. "I'm holding a mortgage on the Telegraph—a big one. I'm neutral in this feud, savvy! But as long as I'm holding that mortgage I'm hardly the gent you should confess to."

Ned's eyebrows lifted in surprise. Old Eams shuffled back to the desk. Briefly the big front door opened to admit Van Deutra who shook rain from his slicker before putting a shoulder to the door to close it against the gale. In that instant there was a volley of gunfire outside.

Deutra whirled around to stare into the street. Another spatter of shots rattled through the night. Without even looking Ned sensed what had happened. Jose had caught up with the Tuck boys!

THEY TOOK Jose down to the doctor's house, and herded Ned across the street to the deputy's office. The deputy had everything figured out; he sat back in his swivel chair chewing on an unlighted cigar and made his pronouncement. In the steaming room were all the Tucks, including Anne. Phil Eams was amoung the missing. So was Van Deutra.

"That shooting out to the Telegraph was faked," the deputy said. "Jose was supposed to miss you, only his shooting wasn't too good because of the rain on his sights, or something."

Ned said stolidly: "I want my lawyer in here. I want Van Deutra."

The deputy tongued his cigar. "You been trying to work up something against the Tucks ever since you hit this region," he went on. "People on the Haystack range always do something like that; it's sort of a disease. Maybe you bushwhacked that Frenchie, too, for all I know. Or your trigger man did it."

This was so preposterous Ned had to repeat it to himself in his mind. Nobody could call that mild little Jose a trigger man.

"Sure—" the deputy added to his incredible tale. "You're careful to be with somebody all the time. With Anne out there—and in the hotel here while your guman goes after her brothers. It's luck, and that's all, that I was walking down toward the *Palace* when Jose begins to shoot." He gloated. "I got him with my first shot —in the head." The deputy was enjoying this. "He looks like he was scalped. He's dead—and you—" his voice raised to a shout— "You're getting out of town, mister. If I see you anywhere around after noon tomorrow I'll run you in as an accomplice in the killing of Frenchie. And that means you'll be cottonwood bait."

He put his feet square on the floor and banged on his desk. "Now get the Hell out of here—all of you," he bellowed.

Ned was too stunned to do anything else, and furthermore he had been relieved of both his sixshooter and the derringer he kept under his vest. He turned away slowly, the pain in his leg numbed by the greater pain. On the way out he glimpsed the hostile and slightly surprised faces of the three Tuck boys. There was compassion in their sister's expression as he went out of there alone into the downpour. He was hardly aware that Anne had followed him. She put a hand on his arm.

"I'm sorry I didn't find my brothers before Jose did," she said hurriedly. "I'm damned sorry."

She was crying. Her brothers came out a moment later, surrounded her, and took her on down the street toward the livery stable. After a while the deputy's light blinked out and the lean lawman stepped through the doorway into the rain.

"Move on!" He jostled Ned.

Ned did not even know what he was doing. Suddenly bursting free

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from his numbed state he lifted his fist in a flash of lightning. Hard knuckles connected with the point of the deputy's chin. Ned swung in a left and another right that crashed the lawman back against the jailhouse. There was a sickening crack of his head on stone and he collapsed all at once like a burst balloon and fell in a huddle on the planks.

Ned unbuckled the deputy's belt to borrow the sixshooters. Then slowly he crossed the street. The roaring of the river dominated everything now, filling the clearing night with a strange eeriness.

Ned was alone. He would soon be hunted as an outlaw—and maybe as a killer....

NED LIMPED around to the back of the hotel where he found his horse and, after great effort, got into the saddle. He walked his mount down the back alley until he came to Miss Anderson's house. There he went through the agony of sliding to the muddy ground and dragging his hurt leg to the back door. He knew nothing about Miss Anderson; whether she had a family or lived alone. He had not even heard her first name. Her kisses were passionate and her body warm. She was scared of something; that was all Ned knew about her.

She opened up to his knock, a tiny crack so he could see only one of her eyes. "Douse the lamp," he whispered. "It's me—Ned Haley. I've got to see you."

"There was some shooting," she said, frightened.

"Douse the lights," he repeated.

The glimmer flickered out and the door opened. When he staggered into the warm kitchen the girl flung her arms around him. She wore only a thin, silk robe that smelled of honey and roses. Her mouth was hot on his, and his heart took a curious skip and jump, like a buckboard hitting a rock in a road when travelling at high speed. He could feel the throb of her pulse too, mad and wild under the

gossamer gown. Delicately, he disentangled himself from her arms.

"I want you to do me a favor," he said. "I want you to get dressed and bring your boss down here. I slugged the deputy; I might need a lawyer."

She clung to him. "Did you kill him?"

"I don't know. His head bounced off the jail wall. Will you go fetch Van Deutra?"

It was strange how this soft girl could become so hard and stiff in an instant. Ned felt her tense up against him, then break away and move across the warm kitchen, a pale wraith of a figure. "I didn't tell you everything tonight," she said in a voice so low he could scarcely hear her.

"No?"

"It all seemed so crazy," she said hastily. "But listen to the river roaring!" Her voice was eerie. "It's raining again. Van Deutra was looking at his maps this evening. He said—" Ned had to cross the room to hear her—"if the river got high enough a case of dynamite on Lookout Bluff could put it back in its old bed."

"Good Lord!" Ned exclaimed.

"It sounded fantastic," she said a little louder. "But after seeing that river tonight, I think that's what they're all up to."

"But why?"

"He's had a shine on that Tuck witch for a long time," the girl said bitterly; "maybe he wants to do her a favor." Her eyes were very wide and round. "He rode out of town about two minutes ago with all the Tucks."

She stopped suddenly. Both were silent. A couple of horses were trotting down the muddy road. They stopped before the girl's little cottage and someone pounded on her front door. Drawing her wrap tight around her she opened up a crack. Ned had one of the deputy's guns in his big fist.

"We're looking for Haley!" It was the deputy's voice and Ned did not know whether to be relieved that he was not dead or alarmed that he was here. "If anybody came by in the

[*Turn Page*]

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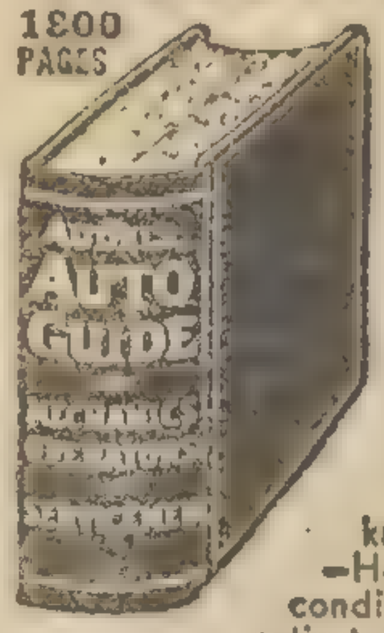

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last few minutes you would of heard him."

"Why—yes—" she faltered. "Somebody did come by, riding fast; but I haven't any idea who it was."

"That must of been him," the deputy said with a grumble. "Thanks."

NED COULD not escape from the girl. When he tried to sneak out while she was dressing she threatened to scream and bring the whole town down on him. Yet each second of delay brought disaster near. If Van Deutra succeeded in changing the course of the river there was no doubt as to what would happen. All Ned's cattle had taken shelter down in the old dry bed of the river or along the lower sloughs. They would all be wiped out in an instant if the river was changed.

The girl was thankfully quick at dressing and spent no time on primping. She was ready as soon as Ned had a fresh horse saddled for her, and the two of them struck out again into the rain. The river was so high now it gurgled over the floor boards of the bridge, threatening at any minute to sweep away the wooden structure. Underfoot the road was so sloppily treacherous the horses had to slow down to a walk in the muddier stretches though Ned desperately urged them on.

When they approached the damp camp where Ned had so hopefully begun to build a new rancho only six weeks ago he scouted it carefully to check on the movements of the deputy who was looking for him. His tent had been ransacked not long ago, but he could not be sure that anything had been taken and was in too desperate a hurry now to make a thorough investigation. Back in the saddle he headed easterly toward the old river bed and for the moment he found Miss Anderson so close to him her thigh rubbed against his. This sensation of nearness was peculiarly pleasant.

She said: "I wish I could ride

[Turn To Page 94]

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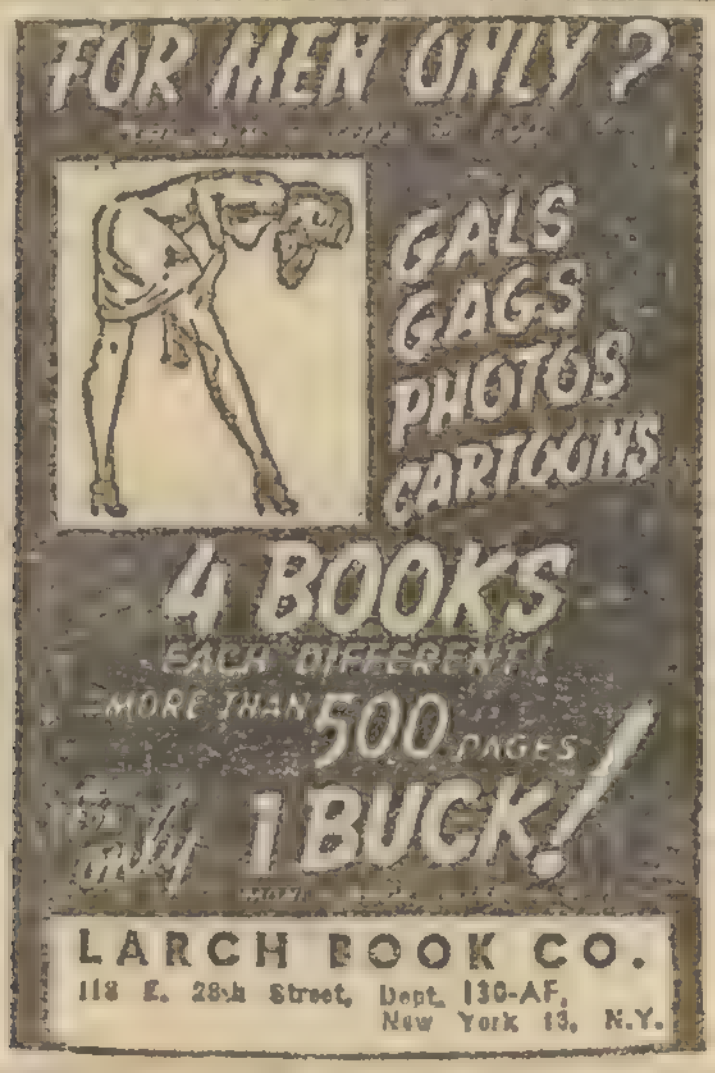

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right out of here. Like on a magic carpet."

He wished it, too, at the moment. His two best friends had been killed in this valley, and almost any moment now his herd might be wiped out. Besides, he knew for sure that an ambush awaited him somewhere soon, for that deputy would never give up his manhunt after Ned had knocked him down in front of his own jail. The magic carpet had its appeal, but the time comes in every man's life when he simply cannot ride out of his troubles. That time had come for Ned.

"You don't have to traipse along," he told her; "you can go on back to my camp—right now."

She shook her head. "It's as if Fate had his hands on me. Ever since the day when you first walked into the office looking for a ranch to buy—"

THEY HAD come to the edge of the slough where the cattle had been in the habit of gathering, and the girl stopped in the middle of the sentence as Ned lifted a warning hand. Already water was purling along the old river bed, and yonderly, beyond sight in the night, cattle and men were moving. The sounds could be read like big print in a book.

"Wait—" Ned whispered.

The girl had pulled in her horse beside him, and for some reason that he did not understand it seemed as if she had always been with him through all the long, lonely years. He held her quiet until sudden gunshots blasted the night a hundred yards or so away, spearing their brilliant pencils of flame. Men shouted and snapped their slickers. Miss Anderson clutched at him, and Ned yelled at her.

"They're coming this way!"

The muddy ground rumbled under the sudden tread of a thousand hoofs. A big, black steer broke up out of the slough to stampede past the man and the woman sitting their surprised horses. Behind the leaders were the

[*Turn To Page* 96]

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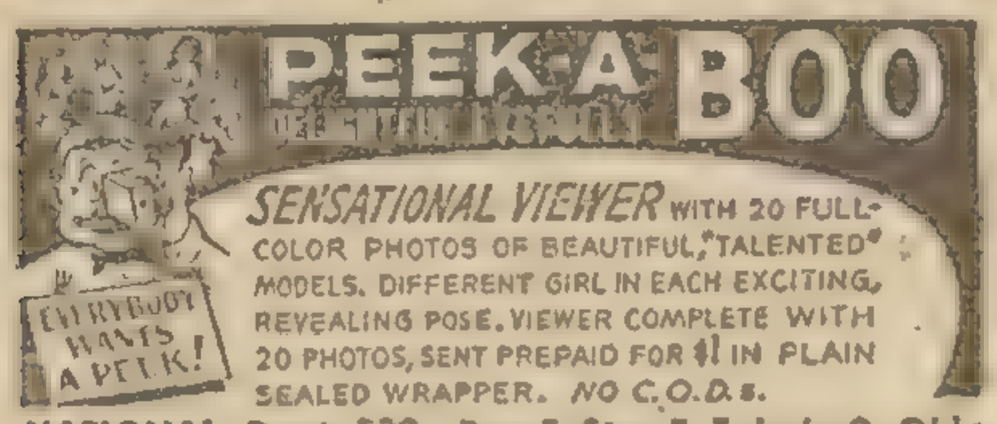
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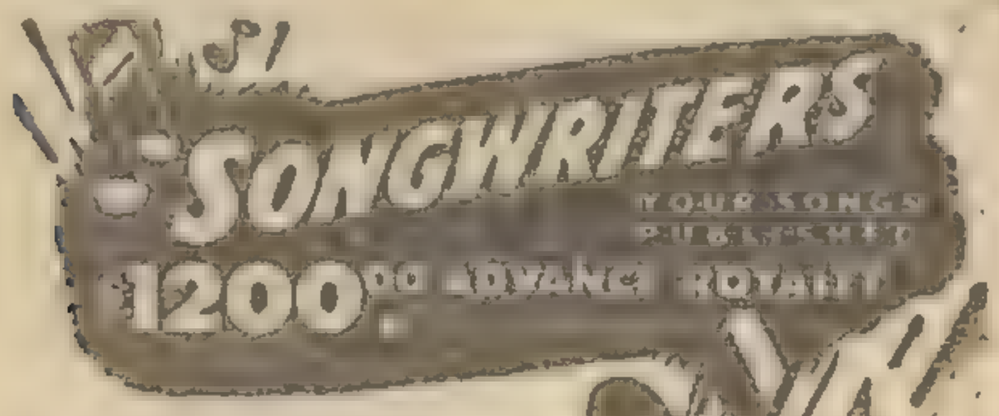

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rest of Ned's herd, a steady torrent of crazed and frightened cattle that would keep on running until they hit the high, far side of the valley.

And behind the cattle were the men who had started the stampede—four men and a girl!

Ned rode out to intercept them. They were all ghosts in the stygian darkness, yet somehow it was possible to recognize them. Those three hulking men were the Tuck brothers. The girl was Anne, and the man beside her was the one for whom Ned had been hunting. His right hand grew hot with the desire for a gun-butt.

"Van Deutra!" he said.

"We got your beef out of that trap," the lawyer said shortly. "But I'm damned if I would have come out here except Anne told me you were too badly hurt to ride any more tonight."

Ned did not savvy this. Anne said to the lawyer: "But, darling, we had to show Mr. Haley somehow that we were not against him. I think he'll believe us by morning."

Ned had trouble piecing it all together. This sounded like a lot of fast talk to him. One of the Telegraph brothers griped: "Why all this palaver. We saved his cows. I need a drink."

There was universal agreement on that subject. Van Deutra recognized his secretary in the gloom. "Good evening, Alice," he said—and then—"There it goes!"

To the north a sheet of lightning like fire seared the sky, and seconds later the rumble of its thunder rolled down the valley. A scarey silence followed that, and then the roar rose again like a freight train rushing down on a grade crossing. Van Deutra laughed as if it were all a joke.

"I always was suspicious," he said, "and I saw the signs when Frenchie was killed. You were supposed to go to war with the Telegraph. They'd fight back. Then with all this rain there was a perfect chance to make another 'Act of God' shift the river again. The whole valley would go

down in the feuding—and the brain behind this would pick up the pieces for marbles."

"Who?" Ned asked.

"I wouldn't know," Van Deutra said; "I'm not that good as a guesser. We better be moving, boys. Listen to that river coming our way!"

IN THE pale light of dawn under a clearing sky the river ripped and roared and rooted its way down the old over-grown bed. It came in a twenty-foot wall of tangled trees, muck and froth and relentless flood. Only Ned and Miss Anderson were there to see it, because the Tuck outfit had drifted on back to town. But neither Ned nor Miss Anderson—what had Van Deutra called her—neither was moved by this awful flood because both were too weary and wet to care. They turned their backs on it and rode to the tattered little camp where Ned had hoped to have found a home. They had to stop for coffee and rest, and the blood began seeping down his leg again.

Ned knew that the deputy would show up here sooner or later—and he could hardly wait for that event. But he was surprised when old Phil Eams rode up as the coffee began to boil in the pot. Miss Anderson was squatting beside Ned like a squaw wrapping up his wounded leg with a piece of clean cloth. She went about her work with a sort of sullen determinedness. Ned waved to the hotel man.

"Climb down and rest the seat of your pants," he suggested. "We'll have coffee directly."

Stiffly the old man got out of the saddle. All his bones seemed to creak. He put out gloved hands to warm them by the fire. "You ain't had a happy time in the valley," he said finally. "Your place ain't going to be worth much now that the river's back in the old bed. But I always liked your looks, boy, and I'll give you a good price for your deed."

"Thanks a lot," Ned said.

He thought how Jose and Jerry had both been shot in the back of the

[*Turn Page*]

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head, and how a man can hardly do that while facing you. He remembered that the deputy had not ridden out of town alone last night.

Old Phil Eams said: "Too bad you got into the fight with the law. Wouldn't be safe for you to go back to town. We'll draw up the papers out here if it's all the same to you."

"Suits me fine," Ned said. "Only let's have some coffee first." He reached for the pot and spilled it, and spilling it, he swore. "We'll have to make a fresh batch. Lookit, Miss Anderson, get a pail of water, would you—I—"

The girl suddenly burst out in tears. "If you call me Miss Anderson again, you dog, I'll—I'll—I'll bite you."

Ned said, "Okay, Elsie—Lucy—"

"Alice!" she snapped.

She picked up the pail to tote it over to the well. The hotel man laughed. Ned checked the fact that one of the sixshooters he had borrowed last night was within reaching distance.

"I just sent her off so she wouldn't be in the line of fire of your private gunman," Ned said softly to Phil Eams; "we all know you or him or both of you blew the bluff into the river last night."

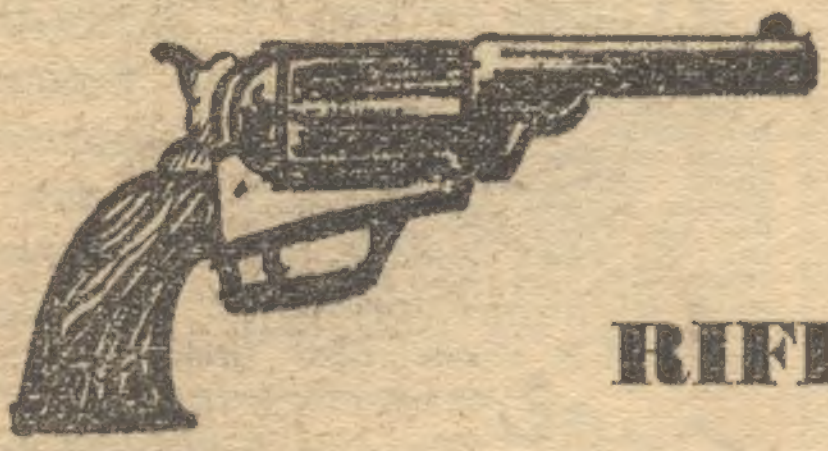
Eams' eyes flickered as if he was searching for someone behind Ned Haley. Ned rolled over and reached for his gun in one movement to come up facing his rear. A rifle barked and his pistol answered. Five times he shot as fast as he could trigger, stitching the brush with lead. Then he turned to let Eams have the sixth slug.

But there was no target. The only shot his gunman had gotten off had killed the old man; he was as dead as any of his victims, and in the brush the deputy lay dead, too, in new but muddy boots.

Painfully Ned struggled to his feet. The girl, standing by the spring, stared at him wide-eyed, not scared, just stunned. "We'll go to town and sleep for a week in Mr. Eams' hotel," he told her, "and then come back here and start building."

She licked her lips. "There's a spare room in my house."

She came over and took his hand, and even if he did think she was crazier than most females he reckoned he'd just as soon if she never let go of him.



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